

Science Fantasy



No. 40
VOLUME 14

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Short Novel

**STRANGE
HIGHWAY**

Kenneth Bulmer

Short Stories

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CARD**

Brian W. Aldiss

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When author Bulmer submitted the following story, we found a note between pages 28 and 29 asking "Can you tell me what the Blobs are?" By which time we had a couple of theories, both of which turned out to be wrong. Before reading past page 29, what is your answer to the same question?

STRANGE HIGHWAY

BY KENNETH BULMER

o n e

The first Blob to achieve national recognition was the fifteen footer that moved ponderously down Fleet Street in the opposite direction to the Lord Mayor's Show. The resultant considerable chaos was greedily lapped up by the eyes of television.

After that convincing demonstration the existence of the Blobs could not be doubted.

With that understanding and despite the funny side of it all that was grimly exploited by every tv comedian, the nation awoke to the chilling shock of confronting in their everyday lives the absolutely unknown and inexplicable. That made everyone apprehensive, irritable, expectant—and very quick on the jump.

Tom Greville's first Blob was very nearly his last.

Driving reluctantly back to work one chilly Monday morning in his exuberant little scarlet Austin Seven that was by five clear years older than he was, and which he had named *Son of Sputnik*, he stopped charitably to give a lift to Miss Clair Bailey of the Accounts Department. The factory which manufactured among other things precision instruments for ballistic missiles and submarines, lay near the river and was approached by a long and narrow lane running between high smoke and soot-grimed walls. The nip in the morning air caused the workers to step out smartly, heads down, each one a puffing generator of steam clouds, rising silky soft on the frosty air.

"This is good of you, Mr. Greville," said Clair Bailey, fidgeting her long nyloned legs amongst the mass of cables and loose footboards under the dash. "I almost decided not to go in today—" and she launched into her Blob story.

Everyone had a Blob story. Even if it concerned only an acquaintance, everyone had a Blob story. As each day passed more and more recounted first hand experiences. Tom Greville listened abstractedly, his mind far more concerned over the debacle he felt sure awaited him in the office. His work had reached a dead end ; and the interview this morning with his section chief, old misery-Malling, held only a prospect of a dressing-down, no apology—and the search for a new job.

Son of Sputnik was purring along sweetly in the crisp morning ; but even so the Jaguar passed with muscular ease and shot ahead. Looking after it, Greville saw beyond the sleek and shining coachwork—the next instant he was trying to brake, put her into reverse, push Miss Bailey out, vault over the side himself and crouch down on the floorboards—simultaneously.

The Blob was just over six feet too wide for the lane.

It came on in the usual Blob silence and sheer inexorable purpose of movement. One side cleared the factory walls by six inches. The other simply ploughed through wall and building alike, pushing bricks and stone and rubble into the lane, undercutting the buildings so that they toppled thunderously into the road after the Blob. Greville had time to see the smart speeding Jaguar slide right under the Blob—and he knew from Blob stories that it would come out the other end barely above molecular thickness.

Clair Bailey was shrieking and jerking like a hooked fish. Caught as he was between several different courses, it took a moment or two for Greville to realise that the girl's long legs were entangled among the ancient car's plumbing. All around them men and women were running. Ahead the Blob bore down, filling the lane, smashing down the right hand walls.

"Hold still!" Greville shouted.

He groped down along slim nyloned legs, found a high-heeled shoe, wrenched savagely. The shoe came away in his hands and the girl's leg kicked upwards. The point of her toe caught him under the chin.

By the time he had figured out where he was and the cotton-wool and drum-rolls had died, the girl was struggling with the door catch. Her sobbing gasps were very distressing.

Greville hauled himself up, thankful that the car was a two seat sports and the hood a flimsy construction of canvas and thin iron girders. He reached across to help the girl but before he could quite master himself and the situation, she had clumsily snapped the door latch back and, taken by surprise, had toppled out.

Her head struck the cobbles of the lane. Her legs still trailed from the running board.

"Hell and damnation!" said Greville. There had never been a chance of turning the car about in the lane before the Blob was on them; but he could have held her in reverse and pulled out that way. Blobs seldom made more than three or four miles an hour.

Reaching out over the girl he did not have the leverage to pull her body into the car. He had to alight from the off-side, run around the bonnet, and bundle her back wholesale.

Although still switched on, the engine had died some time back. He pressed the starter, overpoweringly aware of the rolling nearness of the Blob. Rolling, though, wasn't exactly a good description of a Blob's movement. It was more a macabre parody of what a black and solidified cloud would look like, round and featureless, gliding along, indifferent to any structure of any material in its path.

The engine would not start.

The Blobs just *were*. From nowhere they appeared, moved majestically and unstoppably along and then, just as arbitrarily, disappeared.

She must have torn some vital cable loose. The car was a dead duck. The starter whined shrilly and uselessly.

"Hell and damnation!" swore Greville again. He leaped out, grasped the girl by the shoulders and, with a heave and a wiggle, draped her across his shoulders. She hung a dead weight—frightening in her unsuspected heaviness.

He ought to make enough speed even carrying her to outrun the Blob. Bending over, head thrust out under his burden, he could hear the frightened yells of fleeing people and the oncoming crashing maelstrom marking the Blob's progress with complete clarity in the frosty morning. His breath steamed out before him. He started to run—and was dimly and erratically aware that he was falling backwards without sensation in his hands and feet, that some important burden had been torn from him and that the onrushing wave of star-shot blackness was very comforting and reassuring.

He felt nothing as he collapsed, the brick dislodged from the high wall striking him shrewdly across the base of the head, and toppling him back to spin and collapse huddled against the angle of wall and road.

The House Surgeon was a middle-aged man dressed in a smart laundry-fresh white smock and, in common with every other hospital doctor in the Greater London and Home Counties area, he was living on his nerves and pills in coping with the frightening flood of patients. Evacuation plans were being put into force and queues of school children, all labelled and with their paper bags of food, were arriving hourly at the termini. No one was safe. Houses might collapse at any moment, abruptly undercut or crushed by a mindless, senseless, implacable black Blob. Top floors of buildings were as unpopular as ground floors—and all the floors between. Many people took to camping out on Hampstead Heath and Blackheath and other open spaces. The face of London was changing daily.

Lying flat on his back looking up at the House Surgeon, Tom Greville could see a great city's mystification and misery reflected in that homely, lined face.

"So I didn't get killed," Greville said limply. "How long have I been here?"

"Your concussion was more severe than we expected. You've been unconscious for sixteen hours—"

Greville's head didn't ache and he guessed he had been filled with drugs. He said: "Am I all right?"

"Of course." The Surgeon pulled absently at his stethoscope. "You'll be up and out of here in a couple of days. We've kept you in, despite the shortage of beds, because there was a chance that—that—"

"Well?"

"You are a research scientist, Mr. Greville?"

"Yes."

"Well, I don't expect you to tell me of your work. But I can tell you that your factory was neatly cut up by that Blob and your own laboratory and office was flattened—"

"What has that to do—?"

The doctor reached down to the bedside locker and produced a newspaper. Pictures of Blobs and Blob stories almost completely filled it. "You're in here. This is what I have been asked to draw your attention to."

Greville read the advertisement, prominently displayed in the Situations Vacant page. He looked up, crinkling his eyes at the lights, trying to read some more information from the face of the doctor.

"Who asked you to point this out to me?"

"Mr. Greville—if I was a younger man, unmarried and without responsibilities I now have—I would put on my hat and coat and report to that address at once."

"I'm single, I'm young, I have a reasonable degree and some background in industrial scientific research—both my parents are dead and I am not attached—but I see no reason to chase off to Cumberland in answer to an advertisement requesting men with the qualifications I happen to possess to spend their lives on a government project. So far I've kept very far away from the barbed-wire, Nissen-hut top-secret project. To me, they're anti-human—"

"This one is so much pro-human, Mr. Greville, that—"

Greville caught on. He tapped the paper lying on his chest. "Blobs? Is that it? They asked you as a medical man and, because you were unable at the moment to respond, you're passing the information on to me?"

"Something like that. Your qualifications, of course, are well known, since your Blob adventure. No panics over and above those already in progress are wanted. So publicity is

discreet for this project. Men with the right qualifications will come along."

"What is your name, doctor?"

"Keston."

"Doctor Keston—what about Miss Bailey, the girl with me at the time—?"

The doctor shook his head. "We found one shoe," he said in his grating voice. "Your car was found spread out and a trifle over an inch thick. That was the distance from the ground at which the Blob was travelling. It was inclined upwards at a small angle and eventually disappeared after taking off the top of the Monument."

Greville hadn't known Clair Bailey all that well. She had been just a nice girl working in the Accounts Department who always had a smile ready. He thought of her long legs tangled with the wiring of *Son of Sputnik*—and a feeling in his chest as of indigestion caught him, despite the drugs, and for a moment blinding rage poured through him.

"Damn the Blobs!" he said, pushing up on his elbow. "Damn the mindless beasts! What *are* they, any way?"

Doctor Keston smiled, the lines in his face sliding and altering and turning him from a granite-like medical practitioner to a bravely worried little G.P. He tapped the paper. "Go up to Cumberland and start finding, out, Mr. Greville!"

t w o

Once, long ago, Tom Greville had laced up studded climbing boots, and slung a haversack over his windcheater and gone clambering about in Lakeland. The purple and blue of distant hills, the delicate feathering of a waterfall, the silky ribbon of a river tying a valley floor to two mountain flanks where sheep grazed, had enchanted him. The Youth Hostels had been warm and gay, with singing and guitars at night, and good stories of climbing and hiking and much prodding of Ordnance Survey maps.

So long ago—it seemed like it to him now as he bumped out of Keswick aboard the Landrover, heading for some undisclosed destination in the hills. Yet that holiday had been a scant four years ago. Time, since the Blobs, was divorced absolutely from the distant golden past before the Blobs had come.

Dusk had fallen, golden and sweetly-scented, by the time the Landrover reached the barbed-wire fence. Greville had not exchanged half-a-dozen words with the driver ; at sight of the fence he said, disgustedly : " I might have known."

Misunderstanding, the driver, a burly civilian, said : " Oh, it's not so dismal inside, sir. Quite a bit of social life."

" I'm sure," said Greville.

In the gloom he could see the irregular outlines of buildings, most in darkness. From one hut a line of windows spilled yellow light onto gravel and noise of many voices, laughing, singing, tinny music and the stomping of feet reached Greville as he alighted wearily from the truck, stretching, stamping his feet ready to face what the future held for him in this remote and, still, rather mysterious new project.

The driver helped him with his bags across to reception, where the small room was deserted. The driver dumped the bags in the centre of the floor. They huddled there, forlornly.

" All across at the recreation hut, most likely," the driver told him. " It's just over there, where all the hullabaloo is coming from. Ask for Major Somers."

" Major ?"

The driver laughed, banging his hands together. " Don't worry about that. The Major's the security man. He'll look after you."

Walking across in the darkness towards the yellow windows, Greville wondered just how well taken care of he could be without blowing up. He disliked red-tape and officialdom intensely.

Somers turned out to be of middle-height, lithe, with a brown smiling face and a right hand that shook Greville's enthusiastically and a left that thrust a glass of beer into his. " Hot cocoa over at the mess hut if you want it, Greville. Otherwise, drink that and I'll take you over to the director."

Greville nodded dumbly, and drank. The heat and noise in the hut were overpowering after the quietness of the night. Men and women in lounging clothes were relaxing with applied determination all about him ; a record player was spinning off dance tunes and couples were gyrating in the centre ; off to the sides billiard tables were filled with the flash and click of coloured balls ; darts whickered to sink savagely into target boards, and a few tables were being used to play chess and cards by players apparently oblivious to the din. Greville

followed Somers, winding through the throng, to the bar at the far end.

"New arrival, sir," Major Somers said. "All the way from dear old Blobbed London." He laughed, a laugh that had no humour in it. "This is Humphrey Lackland, director of the establishment."

The Director was silver-haired, hunch-backed and with a pair of pouched eyes in a creased and swollen face. He looked Greville up and down. Then he held out a hand.

"You must be Greville. Welcome to the madhouse."

"Thank you, sir." Greville shook hands, then looked about at the cluster of men and women at the bar. They were all looking at him, smilingly, overpoweringly, like a strange group of dogs sniffing at the latest arrival. "I'm finding all this a trifle—"

"Don't worry, Greville." The woman was short and plump and with heavy make-up disguising the ruthlessness of her jaw and mouth. She wafted a strong perfume as she moved. "This is dance night. We relax strenuously here. And we all work damned hard during the day. Ask His Eminence here." She laughed shrilly and finished her gin at a gulp.

A stirring of resentment began in Greville. He'd come here expecting he didn't know what; certainly not veiled insults from a fat and half-drunken woman.

"I know nothing of what's going on here," he said, making his voice carry. "I understood from Doctor Keston that you had something to do with the Blobs. I suppose you are entitled to slack off during the evening—"

"We do, son, we do," the woman said, chuckling.

"But I fail to understand how a drunken orgy in the Cumberland hills can affect what the Blobs are doing to London . . ."

There was a silence around the group at the bar.

Then Lackland pouched up his eyes. He leaned back against the bar. "Don't worry what Doctor Townsend says off duty, Greville. As for the Blobs—well—"

"Show him, Your Eminence!" The woman—Doctor Townsend—helped herself to another gin. "Take him over to Number One shed and let him see."

"Not tonight!" came the cry from one or two of the others.

"Why not? He's eager, isn't he? All fresh and bright and shiny and still wet behind the ears. Go on! Why not?"

"You saw Charles Randolph in London, I take it?" asked Humphrey Lackland. At Greville's short, half-angry nod, he went on: "I know he told you nothing of what we are doing here. That's as it should be. I saw your papers. You seem to be a sound man. Been wasting your time in industry, I think—"

"I happened to prefer it—"

"That's as may be. But the mere fact that you took on this job, knowing only that it was in some connection with combating the Blobs"—he paused at the word, and his creased and swollen face crumpled a little—"shows that you're the sort of man we want."

"Frankly," Greville said acidly. "I'm beginning to wonder."

Doctor Townsend finished another gin. Her inflamed face was getting on Greville's nerves. A little group had gathered about now and, listening to the Director, Greville glanced about with natural curiosity, wondering if he would see anyone he knew.

Lackland glanced at his wristwatch. "You were too young for the war, I expect—"

"Which one? Adolf, Korea, Malaya, Suez, Cyprus?"

The Director went: "Harrumph!" and bypassed that one.

"The personnel of this establishment are overstretched, young man, as you will find out. Relaxation has to be taken as and when it can be arranged—that is why there is a weekly dance night. Now. I have something on the boil that might interest you. As a higher-physics man and a precision nuclear instrument man, this should be right up your street."

The phrase was unfortunate. Back into Greville's memory flooded the narrow lane bordered by the high walls and the oncoming black menace of the Blob. He saw Clair Bailey's nyloned legs tangled with the car wiring, and her young body toppling from his car—staring about in the hot and noisy room he saw none of it. He was brought back to the present by a single face that swam out of the surrounding ring of faces all staring at him. He caught a grip on himself.

Terry Ponsford.

"Tom! Good to see you again, you old slave-driver."

"Terry! Never thought the Civil Service could corral you—"

Ponsford was big and jovial with untidy hair and a brain that could juggle with the concepts of space and time and speed

and conjure magical lashups in the lab to prove the outrageous claims he made. Greville had known him for a number of student years and had the greatest respect for his scientific capabilities—a respect that was balanced by a resigned acceptance of Ponsford's more energetic rugby moments both on and off the field.

The Director pushed himself from the bar. "Doctor Townsend, I think a little fresh air might be beneficial to you—"

"*Finish off the old bat,*" came a voice from the back of the crowd.

"—and Ponsford, as you seem to know Greville, might like to join us. - Coming, Charlton, Somers?"

Major Somers nodded and the man standing beside him, small, contact-lensed, bearded, with nervously twitching fingers, bobbed up and down, evidently also agreeing. The party moved off, dodging dancers and frenzied chess players alike, until they reached the cool sanity of the open air. Townsend was leaning heavily on Charlton, whose slight frame almost visibly creaked under the strain.

In the middle of it all sanity seemed to have departed from Greville. He knew only that he wanted to tear into a Blob, find out what it was, what made it roll along so smoothly and unemotionally and inexorably—that was the correct word here. The Blobs were inexorable. They stopped for nothing. Only yesterday they had cut a new path through the West End reaching out to clear away a whole wing of Buckingham Palace. And in all this hurly burly of people he had just met, with the clash of personality and the apparently aimless purpose, he could find nothing in sympathy with himself. Even Terry Ponsford blended in with these people as a chameleon might.

The shed to which they were admitted by two steel-hatted and Sterling-gunned sentries, was lofty, wide and extremely long. It might have been an airship hangar. Their footfalls resonated on concrete, bouncing about in hollow darkness. Momentarily, Greville expected bats to fly out before his face.

Someone switched on the lights and strings of fluorescents blossomed along the girders of the roof.

Greville stared. The whole place was bare—a vast bare expanse of concrete. On that concrete, white lines had been painted, running in looping strings, coalescing, forming

junctions, single strands of white paint radiating out and finishing arbitrarily.

Greville said: "You're keeping a log of the courses of Blobs. But—"

"Yes and no, Greville," said the Director. "Yes, in that these are Blob runs, no in that they are not the Blobs you are acquainted with."

At that moment a shrill and very painful alarm bell began to ring. Everyone jumped.

The director said sombrely: "You questioned why we were up here in Cumberland, well away from London and the Blobs. Well—here's your answer."

From nowhere, ten feet off the floor, a round grey featureless ball the size of a dustbin, appeared. One second it was not there. The next, it was. In the racket of the bell, the Director pointed his stick at the Blob.

"They've been appearing here in Cumberland for the last three years. We've no need to go to London to find Blobs."

t h r e e

The regular Monday morning conference was forging ahead in the lecture hall, a barrack-like hut containing rows of uncomfortable wooden chairs and a dais on which stood a table, a blackboard and cine screen—and Humphrey Lackland. The man had energy and vitality, that, Greville had to admit. The hut was shimmering with welcome autumn sunlight striking through clouds of tobacco smoke. Everyone was intent.

The story, as Greville had had it the previous night after walking to his quarters, was relatively straightforward. Terry Ponsford had sat in his cubicle's only easy chair and he had perched on the bed—comfortable, with foam-rubber mattress.

"You see, Tom, when a shepherd—Harry Hawker—told his friends in the pub he'd seen little grey balls rolling about they thought he'd quaffed over-indulently. In the end the police investigated and called us in. I've been in special projects branch of the Ministry for some time now. Well—this was about three years ago, as His Eminence told you."

"He doesn't object to being called that?"

"Well—" Ponsford laughed. "Not really. I wouldn't advise you to put your foot wrong too early, though. Wait a bit."

"So the government rushed a team of experts here, and you watched the Blobs and painted up lines to check their movements. I can appreciate that. But what's it all about? Have you a line on the damned things?"

"One thing I can tell you, Tom. It's pretty important, too. Don't let the Blobs get under your skin. I know what happened to you. Now that London and the Home Counties are under fire, all the good men are being coralled for this type of work. Doctor Keston wasn't a hospital man—he was sent down to get you—"

"But—!"

"The scientific brains of this country are fairly well concentrated, Tom. Each man passing a certain standard of—brightness, shall we say, has a dossier—oh, all right! Don't get on your high horse. I recommended you—"

"Big of you."

"What I was saying is this. You went through a damned bad time back in the Smoke. Up here we've been trying to crack the Blobs for a time now. Every now and then one of us cracks, instead. Take things steadily. Try to see the problem in the round. Don't let it fritter away at your nerves. We are rather like the old war-time bomber squadrons—each one of us wondering when it's his turn to go next. Got me?"

"I—think so."

"Good. The Director is bringing everything up to date at conference in the morning. There are some other new boys and girls beside yourself. See you then."

And so here he was, sitting on an uncomfortable chair with a pad and pencil and a miniature tape recorder, listening to His Eminence, the Director, Humphrey Lackland.

The white painted lines, he gathered, had been an early and long-since abandoned experiment. The hangar-like building had been erected over the spot at which the Blobs appeared. Their movements and courses had been checked by this method for long enough to show conclusively that they appeared at the same spots, followed the same or almost the same paths, and vanished at identical spots at varying distances from their points of appearance. The picture that built up was three dimensional. There was one main nexus situated about thirty feet from the floor; from this central point Blobs appeared at irregular but frequent times, travelled sedately to other spots and vanished. The whole thing when it was drawn up on a

series of transparent sheets, looked like a three dimensional spiders' web.

Confirming what he had learned in London, he heard that nothing could stop a Blob—at least nothing so far tried. Their speeds averaged out at three point five six miles an hour. They travelled always in a line that was straight and undeviating ; although on this point Ponsford expressed doubts. The Cumberland Blobs, however, were never more than six feet in diameter, unlike their London cousins, and they were a silvery grey ; not black.

The electronic, radiation, nucleonic, photographic, sonic equipment used on them was staggering. From it all emerged the single fact that from a Blob no response that anything other than itself existed could ever be gained. They simply *were*. They photographed well. Their temperature, as obtained by thermocouples, was as near as made no difference to zero. Yet water vapour did not condense out on them. There was a very faint repulsive charge, like static, that kept their surfaces free of dust and moisture. Diamond drills whined ineffectively upon their surfaces. They were optically round.

"In short," wound up Lackland, "they're damned monstrosities. And we must open up a lead very soon. Already London is barely tenable. Much more of that sort of treatment, and even the bomb-hardened blitzers are going to move out."

Greville stood up.

Lackland smiled frostily. "Yes."

"Two questions, sir. One, has any research been done on why the Cumberland Blobs are grey and not black, and, two, why they are so much smaller than the London ones."

He sat down.

The Director waited until there was absolute quiet in the hall. Then he said : "One, yes, research has been done. On both questions. Two, no differences in the other characteristics of the Blobs has to come to light. We just don't know why one set is black and the other grey. We have no idea why the London Blobs are so much larger."

Doctor Townsend, looking ghastly, said rumblingly : "We just don't know any damn thing about the filthy beasts."

"We will, my dear doctor," said the Director mildly. "We will. Are there any more questions ?" He peered about like a hunched barn owl. "No ? Very well. Will the new arrivals please report to my office for assignments. That is all."

The conference broke up for mid-morning coffee. Most of these men and women, Greville knew, were hammering hard at particular problems about the Blobs in their line of country. He wondered what His Eminence would assign him to.

When he found out he felt momentarily utterly panic-stricken. He knew his face had drained of blood and he could feel his hands and calves trembling.

He was standing before the Director's desk in his office and Lackland looked up over the big desk like an old and famous cartoon. "What, no arguments that it's impossible, Greville?"

Greville had himself in hand now and as he considered the experiment rising excitement gripped him.

"Maybe it is impossible, sir. Maybe I'm scared silly. But I very much want to have a try—"

"You'll be doing the instrumentation. That's what we got you here for. When that Blob rolled over you—"

"Not over, sir. Wouldn't be here if it had. I was knocked out and fell against the wall, so the curve of the Blob's body gave me plenty of clearance." He made a distasteful grimace with his mouth, an uncharacteristic gesture. "Elementary geometry, sir."

"That was lucky for you—and us. Nucleonic specialists will be bringing their equipment over any day now, Harwell and everyone else. They're all anxious to get in on the act. We felt we needed our own man in on it, too. Ponsford was reminded of you by the newspaper story and the rest followed." The Director riffled a folder out. "Now, this will be the set-up as it concerns you. Most important; I want you to keep me informed of every stage of the work. You can, if you wish, regard that as your most important task."

"I understand sir. If this doesn't work, we might as well pack it all in. This is the most powerful tool possessed by humanity—"

The Director harrumphed. "Except for men's brains, Greville. Don't forget them."

When at last the newspapers and the radio commentators understood the pattern significance of Blob activity in London, a whole new approach was opened up. Knowing nothing of the security blanketed research station in Cumberland, they yet came up with similar conclusions. The Blobs appeared at odd intervals but at similar spots and followed similar paths.

Unlike Cumberland, there was no main nexus ; but many Blob paths intersected and crossed. Once you knew, say, that Blobs were in the habit of appearing in Parliament Square and, in an undeviatingly straight line, progress towards St. Paul's to disappear always just before debouching from Ludgate Hill—why, then life could go on on the borders of that route. People simply settled down to live outside the stampede-runs of the Blobs. Uneasily at first ; but with increasing confidence, London set about reorganising herself around the spider's-web juggernauts in her midst.

Just about that time one single extraordinarily large Blob took into its head—if the beasts had a head, that was—to set off trundling along paralleling M1. Traffic engineers heaved enormous sighs of relief—the concept of a Blob trouble-maker rolling along the Motorway left them shaken and limp. As it was, ample warning was given and a police escort surrounded the black enigmatic ball as it trundled north.

Other large Blobs, all about a thousand feet in diameter, subsequently set off in different directions. The plague was spreading. Free predictions said that the original swarm had become mass-parents—like bees or ants—and the new Queens were out seeking fresh hiving areas.

One, heading for Wales, caused grave concern that it would decapitate Snowdon. Some fears were allayed when the beast vanished from its police escort near Worcester, having bypassed Oxford. When it—or another—reappeared and trundled on, the angles had changed and the people of Wales were treated to the spectacle of a free tunnel being driven through their hills. No one missed the lesson. A Blob could drive straight through solid rock, drilling out a tunnel through mountain ranges. Whatever strange dimension they came from, whatever ghostly explanation lay behind their materialisation, they were no ectoplasmic monsters ; they were solid, they were real—they crushed and maimed and killed.

In Cumberland, Greville had little time outside his own work to absorb what the others on the establishment were doing, a fact which had been one of the causes of his rejection of government departmentalised occupations. He did listen patiently as Terry Ponsford outlined his theory that Blobs did not move in straight lines. Ponsford had computed ballistic curves, and had now come to the conclusion that Blobs moved in elliptic paths ; the axes so vast that their movement gave the appearance of a straight line.

Tied up as he was with the nuclear equipment pouring in together with eager physicists, Greville did not give all his attention to Ponsford. How he was going to tackle the job of instrumenting the new experiment and not tread on the toes of the men to whom the equipment belonged plagued him. Eventually a *modus vivendi* was found—through the communal desire to smash the Blobs—and the equipment, set up, waiting, was all ready for the first run. Greville informed the Director.

Lackland walked across to Number One shed followed by Doctor Townsend, haggard and bedraggled, Charlton, who pulled on his beard, and by Major Somers, whose revolver holster was unbuttoned. Everyone quieted down and Ellis, the physicist in charge, prepared to give the signal.

Cine records and micrometer measurements had given the exact co-ordinates in space where a Blob could be expected to appear. The main nexus had been left alone. Once the experiment was underway no other Blobs were required.

Around this point a fusion ring had been built, in which plasma could circulate freely, held from the walls by the magnetic pinching effect. Many thousands of degrees Centigrade could be built up. With the addition of fresh techniques that were eye-openers to Greville and which, he knew dismally, meant that he was now in possession of government top secret information and must thus consider himself from now on as a suspected person, the general effect of a hydrogen bomb explosion, controlled—just—could be staged within that plasma ring. He recalled his own feelings of panic when the Director had told him that a controlled nuclear weapon was to be exploded around a Blob. He had felt faint then. Now, standing beside his instruments, waiting for the signal, he felt no better.

Ellis was a thin, sandy-haired man with the dedicated hungry face of a man who could entertain no barriers to the advancement of his life's work. Greville wondered how he would react to failure. The shrill painful alarm bell went off.

Triggered to the appearance of a Blob by radar, the bell told them that a Blob had jumped into being in the middle of their equipment. Meters surged sluggishly with power input. The main effect would build up and then discharge in one almighty wallop. Thinking about that, Greville winced.

Ellis nodded. The trigger mechanism was energised. The dials went crazy.

"She's taking everything we put in!" called a man on the power input. The local atomic power station, given over entirely to the project, was full out. In that plasma ring, heat of the order of the Sun's corona was building up. Pressures, away from the magnetically protected walls, must be enormous.

Everyone watched now in quietness. The ticking of clocks sounded very loudly. Greville could hear Doctor Townsend breathing with asthmatic wheeziness near him. He did not take his eyes away from the equipment in the centre of the floor.

He was sweating. His meters were telling the story. Power. Heat. Pressure. The concentrated essence of an hydrogen bomb, blasting around and around in that sausage—and in that sausage, subjected to those fantastic forces, unseen, the grey enigmatic shape of a Blob going through hell.

Ponsford had lined up a pair of field glasses on a tripod. He was watching through them the spot on the wall of the ring where he had foreknowledge the Blob was aiming. Now he looked up, grey-faced, shaken, afraid.

"Switch off! She's going! Switch off!"

Greville acted at once. He slammed over the controls that drained the power, siphoning it away in a mighty splurge of energy that crackled into the atmosphere outside the hut and set everyone's teeth on edge and stirred their hair. If that plasma wasn't drained before . . .

"She's cracking!" Ponsford's yell was lost in the sharp ping of overstrained metal.

Through the side of the metal ring a hole appeared, punched cleanly. From the hole emerged a Blob, grey, featureless, enigmatic, unchanged. It drifted along gently. It moved at its usual pace. For all the Blob was concerned, it had never have been through pressures and temperatures that could be found in the Sun.

No one had the strength to swear.

The equipment collapsed in on itself and the safeties clacked over like gunshots. Heat gushed out. The drainage channels had done their work, Greville was thankful to see, and this electric discharge was only the aftermath.

He glared at the Blob. The thing hung in the air, moving ponderously along, silent, mindless, beastly.

"We've hit it with everything we have," Ellis was saying. He looked ill. "Now what can we do?"

"Pray," said the Director, and he stumped out, hunched over and swollen. They all looked after him.

Humanity, for the Blobs, needn't have bothered to exist.

four

The world held a natural curiosity in the plague of unknown terrors besieging London and the Home Counties of England. With the newspapermen and tv commentators pouring into the country also came scientists determined to add their knowledge to the pool of brains trying to work out some clue to the Blobs. They were welcomed and set to work in office and laboratory blocks set apart for their use—mostly in wrecked buildings along the paths of the Blobs. They wanted to get as near their quarry as possible. One or two were killed.

With the reporters and the scientists flooded in the quacks. Every shade of philosophic reflection was represented.

Priests tried to exorcise the monsters and had to be rescued at the last minute as the ponderous balls rolled on without the slightest sign that the priests were doing anything more harmful to them than singing carols.

Black magic and white magic exponents tried their hands. One character who said that the Blobs were visitors from the stars, claimed that he could talk to their intelligences—he refrained from mentioning little green monsters—and had already written books about other peculiar phenomena, was not rescued in time, and was scraped up behind a Blob.

One scrap iron merchant was enterprising enough to dump his old iron in the path of a Blob and go around afterwards rolling up the neat sheets. Other people soon found uses for the Blobs. They became, almost overnight, a national institution, lived with, grumbled at, laughed at—put up with.

But in the Cumberland hills men and women grappled with dwindling hope with a phenomenon which enraged their feelings that anything could withstand the questing onslaught of the human mind.

The black Blob that had left London and headed north had, after a number of disappearances and reappearances, reached Cumberland. Whether or not it was the same Blob that had begun its journey from London, or whether it was a fresh one at each new appearance was not known; but in the state of knowledge of the Blobs, it wasn't important.

When the possible outcome became apparent; but not certain, the people in the Cumberland establishment felt excitement growing. They awaited this forthcoming meeting with tension, wondering how it would affect them, wondering

if it signified the end of their work. Doctor Townsend, more gin sodden than ever, openly predicted that it was an invasion from the fifth dimension, and that space-helmeted men with ray guns would pour from the Blobs when they met. Others including the bearded Charlton, felt that the grey Blobs were females and the Black males—and that the males were heading for the opposite sex. Doctor Townsend sniffed at that idea and said that sex was a game for mugs.

Greville, after the complete failure of the controlled hydrogen bomb attack on the Blobs, felt that they were immortal, impervious and, despite their solidity, immaterial.

He and Ponsford spent long idea-hours arguing and getting nowhere. "Why is their surface uniformly negative?" Greville demanded. "They repel evenly all over. Positive and negative poles of magnets are treated exactly alike; yet the surface is not neutral, because it repels steadily. Call that negative, as we do; but that's only a name—"

"You mean that we're dealing with a force allied to electromagnetism but not that as such?"

"Yes. Call this force the X-force, if you like. We do know that its poles lie—one, on the periphery of a sphere—and that means that, two, the opposite pole must be at the centre of the sphere."

"I won't argue with that. It could be."

"So maybe the Blobs aren't a single organism or phenomenon, as we supposed. The old bat Townsend could be right. They could be vehicles from some other dimension having a look-see at us."

"And they could be time-travellers giving us the once-over, too. I can't buy that one, Tom."

"If only we could *do* something to a Blob!"

"Supremely indifferent. That is the only description that fits them." Ponsford pulled at his nose. "I told you what happened when we tried to grab one between a press? The whole shooting match just lifted from the floor—"

"What about a violent physical impact as distinct from radiation and heat and pressure?"

"Heat and pressure were applied by the plasma ring in far greater quantities than any physical force could give. But we did get a 120mm howitzer up here, with specially made nose caps concaved to fit the curvature on a standard size Blob." He shook his head. "What a mess! We fired the damn thing off right at a Blob. The shell acted okay—and everyone was ducking the bits and pieces. The Blob was untouched."

"Naturally."

"As you say—naturally."

"Well," Greville stood up, feeling angry. "Let's not get too far pushed into the habit of thinking that nothing can affect a Blob—"

"Can it?"

"Not yet. One day we'll crack them down. One day."

"We may live to see it. I tend to doubt it."

"Terry—when are the two Blobs due to meet? Our selection of seductive grey ones and that black masculine brute from London?"

"Day after tomorrow, if the London one stays on course."

"You're the expert on courses, Terry."

"Day after tomorrow."

Greville laboured under the frustrating and ego-curling idea that he was wasting his time. All that could be tried seemed to have been tried with uniform failure. He was eating four square meals a day, sleeping on a comfortable bed, drawing his salary—and he felt a cheat, a twister, taking this largesse under false pretences. Like everyone else on the site, he was developing a hatred of the Blobs that stemmed from his own feelings of inadequacy. There must be a psychiatrist staffer around; but no one seemed to know who he was.

Privately, Greville thought it might be the old bat.

Other people, in comparison to her, were sane and, with her as a yardstick, could see clearly the sort of trap they must avoid. Yes, Doctor Townsend, blowsy gin sodden old wreck, could very easily be a very smart trick cyclist.

Everyone turned out in force for the great occasion.

The side of Number One shed had been taken out to allow the black Blob from London clear ingress to the flittering grey Blobs belonging to Cumberland. Terry Ponsford was making a book. Greville put ten bob on the Black and grey Blobs just mutually disappearing. Charlton backed with a fiver the most obscene of the runners. Doctor Townsend backed the emergence of the little green monsters. No one else backed that runner—and Greville notched up another mark to her.

On the day, they all watched the Blob move gently across the grass, through the gap in the barbed wire so meticulously measured by Ponsford—"You were smack on target, Terry.

Congrats !"—over the concrete, moving about a foot in the air; and then, abruptly, the Blob was no longer there.

A concreted groan burst from the onlookers.

The scientists were measuring up the exact disappearance spot an hour later with the help of rapidly processed cine film, when they were washed backwards in the expanding air blast as the Blob re-appeared. The sharp cannon-like cracks with which Blobs vanished and arrived was characteristic.

"Watch it, men !" and "Stand clear !" Men and women ran back as the Blob rolled on.

It had turned sharply off course. Ponsford said : "It would have missed the shed by a clear hundred yards before. Now it's smack on target. I wonder—"

"He's spotted the flick of feminine skirts, Terry," Charlton leered.

Doctor Townsend hefted the shotgun she carried under her arm. "I'll blow the first green monster's head off his shoulders," she was grumbling.

"How do you know he'll have shoulders—or a head ?" demanded Major Somers, surprisingly.

The Blob trundled on. In a wide ring around it, the scientists and technicians tracked it along until it nudged against the Number One shed. Its thousand feet high bulk overtopped the roofing and Ponsford's directions about removing girders was seen to be an accurate forecast.

The Blob rolled directly across the concrete flooring, its black curve dominating and then obliterating all before it.

Off to one side a small grey Blob popped into sight, moved along a well-marked path.

"This is it !" yelled Ponsford.

The small grey ball collided smoothly with the black.

For the first time the watching people saw a Blob affected.

The grey curve flattened out, and flattened out in an exactly similar degree the black curve opposed to it. Between the grey and black stretched a flat meeting point, where the two faces pressed together. Blinding light poured from that meeting place. With green and red specks flashing in his eyes, Greville took some time to regain his eyesight. When he looked again, the grey Blob had disappeared, and the black was moving again—was backing out, was retracing its course—was running away.

Charlton said thickly : " By God ! She slapped his face ! "

Townsend swung her shotgun around, peering through inflamed eyes. The Director shouted at her and she reluctantly slung the gun under the meaty shoulder again. Charlton was shouting in his turn at the cine crews, who were still wiping their eyes. Greville felt anticlimax—and yet, deep within him, he had the old feeling that another piece had dropped into place in the Blob jigsaw puzzle.

The black Blob was traced all the way back to London. Its police escort did not let it out of sight. It reached London to the east and, in company with two or three others, plunged beneath the Thames. Its bulk protruded from the disturbed water for a few moments—and then it disappeared.

" Many more like that," a worried P.L.A. man said, " and the Port of London will be unusable."

They set about refloating stranded ships.

Terry Ponsford, in the days that followed that, walked everywhere with an abstracted look, a slip stick, a sheaf of graph papers and without his usual smile. He did say to Greville : " What do you think, Tom ? That confounded idiot Charlton claims he won on the book—that what we saw was the equivalent of a full marriage ceremony. Only, he didn't phrase it like that."

" For all we know it could have been," said Greville, morosely. He went back to nurturing his old wild fancies.

He did not feel inclined to make them public until he had some shred of evidence, and so far he had nothing but a feeling and a heightened imagination, fed by the stories and theories he now read avidly. If he was right, then humanity was in for a succession of shocks unless they could think faster than they'd ever done before.

His feelings of an aimless life were aggravated by his own lack of progress on his own theories. He studied every Blob report, and drew up a series of transparent sheets showing Blob routes over the whole country. Of them all, only three Blobs departed from the normal direction of travel in straight lines either a few feet above the ground or burrowing through it. One Blob started off from Sevenoaks and went almost straight down. Two others went from Limehouse up into the air, carrying on until they reached out into space, and then returning as slowly and as methodically as they had gone.

He sought an interview with the Director.

"Look, your Eminence," he said, coming straight to the point. "I cannot tell you why I'm saying this ; but I have a strong feeling that no one ought to be allowed too near Number One shed in the near future." He paused, and then added with what he hoped was significant emphasis : "I believe that everyone should be kept at least a thousand feet away from it."

Lackland studied him for a few moments in silence. Then he said : "So you believe a grey Blob a thousand feet in diameter is going to appear soon?"

"Yes."

"Charlton has the same idea. He thinks his female grey Blob is going to give birth. I don't know if I can take this seriously, Greville—"

"I don't think Charlton is right, sir. But I do believe we ought to be prepared for—"

The sharp characteristic crack of a Blob apparition was loud and unmistakeable. Both men rushed for the window.

Number One shed was riding along perched on the back of the biggest Blob anyone had seen. A full fifteen hundred feet, it stretched out and up and dwarfed everything. The shock wave had pulverised everything near at hand. The Director turned to Greville.

"You were right, Greville. You or Charlton."

"If I was right, your Eminence, and not Charlton, I intend to follow that Blob wherever it goes. I'm not going to let it out of my sight for an instant."

five

The army provided a searchlight truck and a signal trailer. Sitting yawning in the Landrover with Ponsford snoring at his side, Greville watched the searchlight playing on the silvery grey hide of the monster Blob as it rolled sedately on through the English night. A signaller walked across from the wireless trailer. He handed up the form.

It told Greville that the Cumberland establishment was in chaos. Many more large-size Blobs had appeared. They were fanning out, moving ponderously over rivers and through mountains. Already Greville had followed his Blob through two mountain tunnels that hadn't been there before the Blob started off.

Greville nudged Ponsford awake. The Landrover driver was almost asleep at the wheel ; his job of tooling the Landrover along in the smoothly flattened path of the Blob or of breaking a way where the Blob had been in the air, at a steady three point five six—more or less—miles an hour, was monotonous and boring.

"Whassamarrer?" grumbled Ponsford, sleepily.

Greville handed him the signal form.

"We'd better chart these down, Terry. The log grows. It gets bigger and bigger—"

"But does it tell us anything?" Ponsford yawned and stretched. He shivered. "Damn time they chose to start their tricks."

"Spring is coming in, Terry. Cheer up. Now—let's have another look at the chart."

The two men bent over the paper. On it, neatly ruled off, were the tracks of Blobs, radiating out from London and the Home Counties, with the long trail of the black Blob that had visited its Cumberland cousins being as it were rolled up again by the Blob they were following.

"Going home to pappy," as Charlton had said.

"Looking at this chart, at these sets of radiating lines, Bill, just allow your mind to roam freely a bit. Indulge in a spot of free association."

"You mean like looking at ink blobs—hah ! That flaming word again. And then saying what they look like ? You feel all right, Tom ?"

"Never better. Go on, tell me."

"Well, to be honest, I've always had the idea that they build up to one of those molecule models you see around in waiting rooms of smart corporations. You know, blobs all stuck together with shiny rods of perspex."

"I know. Anything else ?"

"Well, now. If you ask me, that fancy was crazy enough. No. Nothing particular. Look, Tom, what's on your mind?"

"Oh, nothing I can tell you yet. I need further data—and I very much doubt if that will be forthcoming."

"Forthcoming is not the word to use about Blobs. That's certain."

The dark form of an officer approached the Landrover and the driver eased her to a halt. A torch sprang into life.

"Mr. Greville—we've contacted a party out from London. They're convoying a black Blob. Coming this way—"

Greville and Ponsford were out of their seats like two jumping champions.

"Give us the direction, quick!" yelled Ponsford.

"If they meet up—" Greville felt excitement. If these two Blobs, of the same sizes, presumably, or near enough, met he might find that extra information he was looking for.

The police officer in charge of the London escort met them in a deserted field, pale under the moon, midway between the two rolling mammoth balls. Maps were compared and directions measured off. Two pencil lines were matched.

"No go," Greville said. Disappointment weakened him and he was betrayingly aware of the chill of the night and the weariness in him dragging at his bones. He shivered. "They'll pass within a half mile of each other."

"Damn it!" said Ponsford. "We might have seen something worthwhile."

The police officer made interrogatory noises; but the two scientists did not enlighten him. If anything were to happen, he would find out then.

The two convoying parties maintained contact as the Blobs neared. Each rolling ball, one grey the other black, trundled on imperturbably. The night grew colder and longer and more bleak. Hot cocoa was brewed on a Primus and the men warmed themselves by swinging their arms and stamping their feet. Time passed.

At precisely three fifteen in the morning a change in direction was reported in from the grey Blob. It had swung in its movement and was now heading directly for the black.

The men cheered up. Unless some inanimate electronic or X-force attraction was controlling the Blobs so that they responded to each other with the mere mindless reaction of magnets, this deliberate shift of direction could mean only that they were intelligent. What that degree of intelligence might mean, no one was prepared to say. There was so much about the Blobs that could be speculated and so little known that any hypothesis was an impudence.

"This must be one of the group that set off just before we left Cumberland," said Ponsford. "I'd guess they're making better time than the three point five six miles an hour of the earlier ones."

"Could be." Greville checked with the black Blob's police escort. "You're right, Terry. There are another six of 'em

following up." He chuckled sourly. "Maybe, if Charlton's right, they've had the report in from their pal that females are available up north."

"But," asked the policeman, "where do they go to, and where do they come from?"

Ponsford blew out his cheeks. "You ask," he said. "I don't know. Maybe they grow somewhere and only appear to our senses when full grown. Maybe they hibernate or something. All we can work on is what our senses or our equipment can pick up. Nothing there—nothing we can tell you."

"Well, they're breeding like flies down in London now."

"And where our beastly came from, too." Greville had gained a fatherly attitude to his Blob. He felt—if his theory was right—that he'd like to see the black Blob vanish in fire and thunder rather than the grey.

An hour later the men were ranged round the meeting place of the Blobs. Greville had a flash of feeling, as though he was looking back down the funnel of time and was watching a dawn procession of chanting men and women, converging on the stone where lay the bound and naked body of a young virgin with the priest's sacrificial flint knife jaggedly upraised.

Alternatively, he felt that he was peering into a microscope and watching the approaching collision of two amoeba. Either fancy was grotesque—and either, in this instance, might fit the facts as he knew them.

Deciding that he had to lodge some germ of his theory into Ponsford's head before the clash, he began to sketch out mathematical formulae. "My maths aren't up to this, really, Terry," he said in the torchlight. "But I can say this. If I'm right, watch out for—wreckage afterwards."

Before Ponsford could reply the whirring chopping of a helicopter reached them. She landed in the light of lorry and Landrover headlights. Humphrey Lackland and Charlton alighted, followed by the lumpy, bat-like form of Doctor Townsend.

"Had to come and see myself," the Director said, shaking hands with the police chief. "The radio just isn't sharp enough when you can have a front seat yourself." He swung to regard the two Blobs, now only yards apart.

"We've brought dark glasses," said Townsend, handing them round. "Remember what happened before?"

Those who knew didn't bother to answer her ; the others were too excited over the coming collision to ask right then.

Greville adjusted his dark glasses and felt he'd gone blind. He could just see the searchlights fixed on the two Blobs. He lifted the glasses, found the Director, and touched him on the arm.

"Your Eminence—before the big bang. May I say that if my theory works out right—"

"What theory?"

"—then we'll have to stand well clear of the collision point and look out for wreckage afterwards."

"Wreckage?" The Director shoved his glasses up. "What are you talking about, Greville? It is Greville, isn't it?"

"Yes—but—"

"They're touching!" The shout cut off everything else.

Greville jammed his glasses down. "Switch off the searchlights!" he yelled and when they went out wondered if he'd done that or whether someone else had the sense to cut them. Implacable darkness fell.

Into that darkness stole a radiance. Light pulsed around a perfectly circular plane. Greville knew that that plane was the demarcation line between the two faces of the Blobs, between the grey and the black. He remembered with an incongruous chuckle that Ponsford hadn't made a book this time.

"Cameras!" the Director was shouting.

The countryside awoke to a ghastly yellow glow. Trees and hedges stood out starkly. All the shadows wavered away blackly from that central point.

They began to feel the heat. Streamers of fire were sprouting now from the intersection of the Blobs, lances and swords of radiance stabbing deeply into the mysterious heart of the rolling balls. Greville strained his eyes, shielding with his hands the direct glare, trying to look into the centre of the grey Blob. Everyone else, he guessed, was staring hypnotised at the junction where fire and thunder and great heat burst out.

He thought he could see something, something solid there in the irradiated heart of the Blob.

His heart lurched. Maybe he was right. Maybe, after all, he was right!

If he was—then all thought was driven from his head in the violence of the explosion. The grey Blob ballooned. Its

swollen bulk expanded with frightful rapidity. The same curve that had saved Greville when he had fallen in the angle of wall and lane when the advancing Blob had bypassed him, saved them now. The rushing grey skin swept up over their heads, taking hats flying, sending electric tingles through everyone, deafening them with a thousand waterfalls falling onto a million tin roofs.

For a microscopic segment of time Greville saw deep into the heart of the Blob. Before he could cohere what his eyes reported back to his brain the blast flattened him to the ground. His eyes streamed with tears. His skin felt roasted.

And then it was all over.

"Searchlights!" someone was yelling. They came on. In the glare, a candle-flame compared to the blast, they all saw the black Blob, moving forward erratically. It pulsed. It shrank in size and then puffed out. Colour ran and coalesced over its periphery. They stood, frozen, watching it. Then it vanished.

Greville gave an exhausted, dazed exhalation of breath—and rounded on Lackland.

"Everyone out there searching!" he yelled. "Don't miss a thing. That Blob may reappear any time and if it pops up when we're there—"

Automatically, the others obeyed. Torches flared out. Directly ahead lay a small wood. The meeting so spectacularly consummated, lay to one side. Over the field, brown and sodden in winter ploughed barrenness, the men searched.

After an hour they trailed forlornly back to the ring of vehicles. Complete despair gripped Greville.

"Nothing!" he said. "Not a single thing."

"Now perhaps you'll explain what this is all about, Greville!" demanded the Director with asperity. "You drive us all on a wild goose chase. We find nothing where the Blobs met. You mentioned wreckage, I think. Well?"

"I must have been wrong." Greville felt awful. "But I'm not alone, am I? No one else has been right about the beastly monsters, have they?"

"Perhaps not. But no one else has made men rush into quite possible danger—" The Director's words were broken by the cracking cannon-blast of an appearing Blob. The black Blob had jumped into existence, in exactly the same position it had occupied before. Now it held steady, enigmatic, as all

Blobs had done. The streamers of light and colour no longer rippled on its surface. As they watched, it began to move.

"Back," said Ponsford. "Going back to the Smoke."

Through his misery, Greville felt he had at least to try one more shot. "No. Going to join his pals. They'll all meet up and then they'll disappear. Shortly after that they'll reappear again. It's my guess then that they'll go on. And they're heading for our grey Blobs in Cumberland."

Lackland stared at Greville from his pouched eyes. Somewhere a bird was beginning the pre-dawn chorus—alone and small in the winter solitude.

"I'd like an explanation, Greville. Please."

Greville took a deep breath and mentally jumped off the high board. "I thought we would find the wreckage of a spaceship—"

"A what !"

"A spaceship."

"You mean that the Blobs are extra-terrestrials' method of transport in reaching our planet ? That they jump into a Blob on Mars and jump out of one here ?"

"Not quite, sir. I've been checking up on their progress charts. As you know they appear and disappear from similar spots. They trundle along what you could almost imagine as grooves. We've—Ponsford and I—charted every movement we could get hold of. The resulting pictures told me what I thought was the answer."

"I'd like to see the charts. Are they different from the ones we have up in Cumberland ?"

"Yes, sir. Here." Greville went to the Landrover. He took the top sheet of graph paper. "Look. The Blobs appear in certain central points, and then travel from there to other central points, where they disappear. Another Blob—or the same one—then appears and returns. The whole picture builds up to—"

"A model of a molecule ?"

"No, sir. If you take a picture of the Galaxy and draw lines from star to star—you'd end up with a picture like this."

"My God !" After that, there was a silence.

At last the Director said : "Spaceship. Lines of travel from point to point—from star to star in the Galaxy. Do you believe this ?"

"I did. I'm not too sure now."

"You actually mean that you think a star system exists on the surface of this Earth—which is rotating about its own axis, around the Sun, and around the Galaxy—and that someone is using Blobs as a means of transport?"

"Not the Blobs themselves, sir. When I said I expected wreckage, and then mentioned spaceships, I had the idea that spaceships were inside the Blobs and were generating the forcefield sphere around them—the force we've called the X-force."

"But where do they come from? Where do they go to? And why such slow movement?"

"Have you read of the theory of hyper-space, sir? Or sub-space, neg-space—the writers have different names for it, and different theories, too; but they all boil down to the method of travelling faster than light."

The Director sniffed. "I have read—stories—in which this concept has been used. Well?"

"Well, sir, when you want to send a fictional spaceman to, say, far Centaurus, you can do it faster than light and obey Einstein only by postulating that the ship is placed into another space-time continuum from this one. Then you travel at normal speed there, but you go faster than light here."

"A device. It has been labelled fantastic. And so it is."

Ponsford had been very quiet. He kept looking at the charts and then up again at Greville.

Now he said: "And you think this is a reversal effect—?"

"Yes." Greville spoke firmly. "I believe that somewhere exists a race of people who have formulated the hyperspace equations, and travel in their universe faster than light by popping into ours to travel quite slowly, and then going back from what is to them hyperspace into their own space-time continuum again."

Lackland was breathing heavily. Doctor Townsend was standing close to Greville's back, her shotgun almost nudging him to go along quietly. Charlton was pulling his beard and scowling.

"I can't accept it," the Director said at last.

"I can offer no proof. I didn't intent to talk; but I was sort of pushed into a corner. When the grey and the black Blobs met, I believe we were witnessing the first contact of two peoples in their own galaxy. The whole pattern follows, if you think it through."

"And they'd be green monsters with tentacles, hey?" said Townsend, breathing gin fumes down Greville's neck.

"No," he said angrily. "If they come from a different dimension from us then they're more likely to be quite human."

"Different dimension," said Townsend. "I seem to think I've heard that before. Now, if you'll just—"

"Hold it, doctor," said the Director sharply. He paced up and down.

"Your only safety, Greville, lies in the fact that no theory at all is too impossible for the Blobs. God knows we know nothing about them apart from a few measurable superficialities. The damned nonsensical part of it all is that you could be right. I don't think so—but then I equally don't think you are not right." He scowled in the dawn light at Townsend. "And put that damned great shotgun down, doctor. Greville's as sane as you or I."

Greville said, slowly: "I want to see the cine shots of the Blobs' meeting. I tried to look into the grey Blob. I thought—I thought I saw a fish-shape in the heart of the grey Blob in the instant before it exploded." He paused, trying to recapture that fleeting impression. "I thought," he said, slowly in the crisp morning air, "I thought it looked exactly like a spaceship."

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The army signals detachment had built a fire on the edge of a field and thick hot cocoa was handed around to the grateful men—police, soldiers and civilians. Doctor Townsend with her shotgun propped against her ample thigh was busily spicing her cocoa with gin. Greville shuddered, and said: "How long will those films be?" He was fretting.

Humphrey Lackland drank thoughtfully. "I've been running over the sequence of events," he said, warming his hands around the enamel mug. "And the more I think, the more I come to the unpleasant realisation that you could be right, Greville."

Charlton chipped in, eager and intense. "We've been watching the grey Cumberland Blobs for three years or so now. That could be a testing period for these postulated aliens of yours, Greville. In London's rabbit warren the black Blobs could have been similarly tested—and my guess would be under the Thames—for quite as long without being spotted. You're more alone in London than on the Cumberland hills,

you know. Right. Well, accepting that, the black Blobs then build larger spaceships—”

“Let’s put this into the right terminology,” said the old bat, surprising them all. “The Blobs are merely the shell of this X-force surrounding the spaceship generating it. When a ship wishes to travel from one star to another in this other dimension she switches on her X-force generators, pops into hyperspace—that’s our space—and travels to the other star, switches off her generators, and to us she disappears. But all we see is the outside of the sphere of X-force.”

“Right, doctor,” said Greville. The old bat was letting her ginned-up camouflage slip.

“Granted,” said Charlton. “So after a period of experiment the people using the X-force that generates a black Blob build larger ships and set off exploring their galaxy. When they met up with the people using grey Blob hyperspace ships, there was a fight. The small test ship was destroyed and the black Blob went back home for reinforcements. Those are the six or so rolling north now. In the interim the people up in Cumberland built large ships and one travelled south to have a look at the potential enemy. She was caught by a black Blob and destroyed. Now what happens?”

Greville went back to his original idea. “What may have happened is that the two ships fought through their own hyperspace spheres and when one was destroyed she simply drifted free in her own true space. I was hoping that some part of her might have been projected, as it were, through to us. I’d still like to organise a more complete search sir,” he added, looking at the Director.

“Yes. We should do that.” Lackland found the police chiefs and gave his orders, disguised as requests.

The signals officer walked up, saluting. He was young and fresh-faced, and wireless communications were to him mother, father and mistress in one. He looked tired.

“I’d like you to hear a tape we made when the explosion occurred,” he said. Through his tiredness excitement showed. “The signals were picked up and recorded on the normal sets—” He went into technical details as they all walked across the heavy earth to the signals trailer.

The tape ran smoothly. The voice was a man’s, firm, authoritative, peremptory. The language was gibberish.

“Anyone recognise the lingo?”

Everyone shook his head. The message or fragment of message was quite short, and broke off abruptly.

"We'll set the philology boys on that," said the Director.

Then they all went very expectantly across to the helicopter which had just returned with stills from the cine shots. The prints were handed around in silence. Staring at the glossy black and whites, squinting through the colour transparencies, Greville felt his elation as a slow unseen surge of emotion like a tide breathing beneath the ocean; powerful and betraying and sweeping away anything that fell into it. They had to believe him now.

"If this can be regarded as any sort of proof, Greville," the Director said, hunching himself up, "you were right."

The shots showed a quick sequence of fire from the Blobs' meeting and then, deep in the heart of the grey Blob, quite unmistakable, the outline of a fish-shape, a torpedo shape with fins and venturi tubes. Rapid computing showed the spaceship must have been four or five hundred feet long, a slender, streamlined shape of power and speed and majesty.

"And that man was talking either from the ship in the grey X-field or the black," Greville said with certainty. "Let's not get too excited. So all right, so we've at last found out what the Blobs are. But we still can't do a single thing about them. Merely because we know what they are doesn't mean we can stop them from carving up the country."

"But we have a lead!" Ponsford said eagerly.

"We have something to work on," Charlton said. "I know a couple of men who'll work all night and day trying to crack the maths of this—now we can show that such a thing is possible."

"We'll need to set up a whole new project," said the Director. "Harrumph, yes."

"Little green men from another dimension," said Doctor Townsend tipsily. "Oh, dear!"

"I said before that if these people are from a parallel dimension, then it's quite likely that they'll be humanoid." Greville was well-versed in theories of the pack-of-cards concept of the dimensions. "If only we could find a way to break through into their dimension, we might be able to communicate with them, tell them what they're doing to us, bargain with them—"

"I don't have to point out that they are well advanced over us in scientific matters," the Director said. "I doubt that we could say much to change their habits."

Then Greville laughed. "Y'know, the way we're all taking this is typical. We're scientists, and we're confronting another new scientific and technical puzzler, a problem to be worked on as we always work on problems. But just think of the reactions say, if the Press splashed all this over the front pages. The deep psychological and metaphysical nonsense some so-called deep-thinkers would come up with, all to earn their penny a line."

"We have a job to do," said Charlton impatiently. "We just don't have the time to get all emotional. Now, Your Eminence, if I may contact—" he went off, sketching out a scheme. Lackland nodded his swollen head vigorously.

Greville looked across at Ponsford.

"Coming for a walk, Terry, while they erect another big-time top-secret government research establishment?"

"Suits me."

The two men walked off, stretching their legs in the thin winter sunshine, breathing deeply. Greville said slowly: "I'm still half-hoping that the searchers will turn up something. I'm going over there now. They can use all the help they can get."

"You're more likely to turn something up. I figure you know what you're looking for."

"Yes," Greville said mildly. "I'm looking for a hyperspace starship."

The searchers were scattered over the fields, walking along, prodding, knowing only that they were looking for 'bits of metal wreckage. You know, like when the Heinkels and the Dorniers sprayed bits and pieces over the countryside.' They were not particularly happy about it; it was a raw morning.

Despite Ponsford's cheery remarks, Greville could allow no real hope of success. The more he thought about the problem the more he was convinced that in any action between starships actually in hyperspace a casualty would almost certainly return to her own space-time continuum. All he had read in postulated accounts seemed to agree on that.

They tramped on over the loamy, sharp-ridged fields, their shoes rapidly clogging with fruity soil until they were a pair of Farmer Giles in the winter morning. Greville aimed for the

wood. Out of the direct field of the cataclysm, it yet seemed to him the only logical place left to search. They reached a split-rail fence, sagging along a muddy ditch, and cocked their legs over. The wood was dark and damp and nostril-filling with the scents of decaying leaves.

A soldier with slung rifle appeared between the trees.

"Nothing in here, sir, as far as we can tell. The lieutenant's had us all hard at it. I'm going for fresh orders to the radio truck."

"Hell and Damnation!" said Greville, lapsing into his old cuss-words. "All right. What I'm looking for wouldn't be missed by a platoon of riflemen. Where's the truck? We'll come with you."

He did not enjoy the tramp across soaked fields to the truck. A sergeant was waiting with fresh orders and when these had been passed on to the rifleman, the NCO turned to Greville and Ponsford.

"Would you be Mr. Greville, sir?"

"Yes."

"Message from Doctor Townsend, sir. Will you please go at once to Little Lower Blatsford."

"Now what does the old bat want?" asked Ponsford.

"Where or what is Little Lower Blatsford, sergeant?" asked Greville.

Whilst Ponsford grumbled away about the unattractive female doctor, Greville found the village marked on the sergeant's map and set about organising transport. By the time they had located a Landrover and a driver and were on their way, the morning had gone. The village lay snuggled between two low hills, bare now in the winter hibernation save for naked lonely trees, and then, when they drove in and began asking questions, found that the place they had come to was Little Upper Blatsford. Lower Blatsford was two miles further on.

Before the driver could engage the clutch, Greville asked the farmhand they had been questioning: "Is that Little Lower Blatsford?"

"Oh, no." The farmhand was young and impatient, with his tractor thumping away outside the garage. "All these here old-fashioned names play the devil with strangers. We do have fun—"

"Well, where the hell is the place then, man!" barked Greville. He felt on the edge of important discoveries, and in

no mood for a modern-minded farmer to bandy words with him. With the information given and received in a frosty atmosphere to match the past morning, they set off again and eventually rolled into a village of half a dozen cottages, three pubs, a church and the raw red brick of a housing estate uglily garish flanking a little river.

But there was no need to ask why they had been brought here.

Across the river, across the graveyard, across one of the pubs, lay the long lean torpedo shape of a metallic, still-shining but sadly damaged spaceship.

The whole area teemed with military and police activity. Any attempt to keep the incident under wraps had been doomed from the moment the ship had fallen. No one knew much. One moment they'd been bustling about their jobs and the next the ship had fallen across the village. She could not have fallen far, not only her own relatively undamaged state showed this; the bricks and mortar were merely crunched down and not pulverised to dust in the jagged-teeth effect of corners of buildings protruding from the sleek and shining hull.

They found Humphrey Lackland arguing in icy formality with a large, red-faced, raw-beef man. He was introduced as Sir Pomfrey Hartington. And he was here, flown up from London, to take charge of the government enquiry into this affair. Greville found time and energy to laugh. "The two big-time men of the government's pet scientific panel now lock horns," he said. "They're like a couple of dogs fighting over a bone. Come on Terry, let's get inside that ship."

On two counts it wasn't as easy as that.

Few people missed the significance of the fallen ship. Already the air was filled with news stories telling of the first alien spaceship to reach Earth, and Mars was the favourite starting point. Temporarily, the Blobs were pushed off the front pages and the first five minutes of news time. The ring of soldiers around the ship were in the best horror-film tradition—which meant that to a man like Greville they were ludicrous and rather disgusting.

He left the two would-be directors arguing over divided responsibilities. For himself, he felt absolutely convinced that this spaceship was no normal interplanetary visitor—she could only be the ship that had travelled in a grey Blob from Cumberland.

Achieving ingress to the inner ring of sentries was so tough a job that Ponsford was red-faced and angry and said fiercely that getting into the ship herself would be impossible in face of red-tape, brass-hatted, bureaucratic nit-wittery.

"Go it, Terry. You're learning."

"The queue for admittance forms to the right," Ponsford said. "I suppose you must expect it. The first spaceship to land on Earth—and you have to fill in forms in quintuplicate and wait around for appointments before you're allowed even to go within spitting distance."

"So many brains have rushed here that the place is overcrowded. And with the Director having trouble with his opposite number—"

"His Eminence has no power in this set-up, Tom. That's the trouble. Half Whitehall are before us in the queue."

They stood there, regarded stolidly by a steel-hatted soldier with a cradled Sterling. They stared past his head, craning to see between his helmet and his comrade's next in line, to the bulk of the ship. From their angle all they could see were the angled fins and a couple of tubes clustered at the stern. As they watched a gang of workmen began draping large camouflage netting sheets around the ship, effectively hiding her from view. The mundane hosts were being shut out.

"Blast it," said Greville. "Look, Terry—in all the hullabaloo—very natural, too, when you think about it—two up and coming young scientific fellows like us aren't going to get far."

"But it's so damned stupid—!"

"I know. Those people so importantly setting up their equipment out there don't even know that this ship doesn't come from our own space-time continuum." He paused and then went on in an altered, sombre voice. "And, you know, maybe the poor devils inside don't know either. To them, after the fight, this planet must seem a handy haven where they can touch down to effect repairs."

"You mean they don't realise—?"

"Yes. It's only a theory, like all the rest of it. I wonder if the airlocks are opened yet? Or—even if there are any airlocks."

"You said the people ought to be humanoid."

"I said so. I've no great faith in it. Come on. Let's find His Eminence."

The Director had parted company with his opposite number. His swollen, pouchy face was visibly enraged.

"Never before in all my public life have I been so insulted!" He stormed out at them as they came up. "Greville! You're going to see the P.M. right now. Take Ponsford and Doctor Townsend along." He grumbled and muttered and swished his stick around. "I'll see that confounded pompous ass Pomfrey Hartington hung, drawn and quartered before I'm finished." His Eminence was exceedingly wroth.

Charlton, also, was angry, irritably jiggling up and down. "We follow that ship down all the way from Cumberland and now these new fellows have the infernal gall to tell us to sheer off! Why, that's *our* spaceship out there!"

"Tom Greville's, you mean," cut in Ponsford quickly.

"Any theories, Charlton, why she jumped from the Blob to land here?" Greville had been mulling that one over. "It must be a good fifteen miles."

The Director growled out, swinging his stick. "I am now fully convinced of your theories, Greville. From now on they are official establishment policy. And the reasons I give for the spatial displacement of the ship are bound up with the way in which the hyperspace equations operate."

Charlton nodded. "My colleagues are working on them now. As I see it, to move, say, ten light years—three parsecs or so—in the aliens' real world, you have to punch through into our space-time continuum rather like running along the spoke of a wheel. That movement is achieved by using the X-force. When you reach near enough the hub you may then travel lengthwise in space quite slowly and for a short distance. That is the physical segment of the journey we see happening on Earth and the planet's movements in our space have no bearing whatsoever on the co-ordinates in the aliens' universe."

"And having moved a short distance here," Lackland finished, "you return along what in effect is another spoke of the wheel using the X-force again, and when you pop back out of hyperspace you find you have moved a hell of a long way around the rim—those three parsecs Charlton postulated you wanted to move." He drew a deep angry breath. "And now cut along to the P.M. I've fixed *that* up, anyway."

"Wouldn't it be better if you went, sir?" Greville said tactfully.

"No! I want to stay here and plague Pomfrey. I'm getting most of our staff down here and I'll run him to a frazzle before I'm finished. He can't take my project away from me!"

Greville chuckled, acknowledged, and went off with Ponsford and the old bat. Sometime during the morning she'd had a wash, cleaned up the cosmetics on her face, straightened up her shirt and slacks and furcoat, and looked presentable. In honour of the PM, guessed Greville, and chuckled again.

They went by helicopter and were in Downing Street soon after tea time.

After a tedious wait, with the dusk drawing in and the lights going on, they were at last ushered into the PM's private room where he and half-a-dozen men who said 'jump' and the country jumped were waiting.

"Humphrey Lackland tells me that you have a full report on what is happening with the Blobs now, and that this has something to do with our unusual visitor?"

"Yes, sir." Greville made his report. He knew exactly what to say, having had ample time to study His Eminence's aide-memoire.

The PM absorbed what he had to say in silence. Then he said: "The scientists assigned to a study of the alien vehicle inform me that they have reason to believe that this vessel has travelled to this planet through space from the planet Venus—"

"Nonsense!" exploded Ponsford.

The PM rode over that. "Naturally, I am not as familiar with scientific matters as the scientists of the country; but I am only too well aware of the differences of opinion that can and do occur. Looking at both theories with an open mind, which do you feel to be the more logical, the more likely?"

"Why, mine, of—" Greville began to say. Then he stopped. For when he looked straight four square at both theorems, he had to admit, reluctantly, that the idea of a spaceship reaching the Earth from Venus was far more credible than the concept of one popping out of a Blob having gone through some highly-fanciful type of hyperspace.

"All right, sir," he said in the same breath. "All I can say is that I have complete faith now in the ideas that I have put before you. I am requesting permission, from Humphrey Lackland, for admission into the spaceship without reference to Sir Pomfrey and his new project people—" He was nudged gently on the arm by Townsend. Glancing at her, he suddenly realised that she had stopped him before he could get into his stride and say some of the uncomplimentary things festering in his mind about other government departments and projects

that clashed and personality battles that cared nothing for the work in hand.

Townsend said in a voice Greville had never heard her use before: "Can you tell us if communication has been established with the aliens, sir? Are the airlocks open? Are the aliens alive? Has anyone gone in?"

The PM consulted a note on his desk. "No sign or signal has been received from the—ah—space vessel since she landed. The latest report I have, half an hour ago, merely states that no further progress has been made. I have to make a statement to the House later on, and I am being kept informed at thirty minute intervals."

"Thank you—" Townsend said.

Greville cut in, speaking off his own bat—and hang the consequences. "Might I suggest, sir, that you make no mention of my theory? That way, we'll have—"

"Don't worry, Doctor Greville. I have no intention of mentioning your—ah—theory."

Ponsford chuckled, audibly.

When at last they left the presence, Greville felt comforted. The old buffer might be only a politician; but he was trying in these harrowing days to act like a statesman. The helicopter whisked them north again, and this time Greville was armed with papers that should take him right past the picquet line around *his* spaceship.

When the cutting crews finished with the airlocks Greville was the first man through. He walked through warped and tattered corridors, from stem to stern. He found corpses; men and women who might have been born anywhere on Earth, with the same colour and physical variations. He found not a single living soul.

"At least," said Charlton with immense satisfaction, "we have the engines and the equipment and all their science to explore."

"But no people," said Greville. "No one left alive. People are important, not machines."

He left the others to their work and went home to bed and to brood sleepless through the night, far too tired, and with a wildly whirling brain, to find sleep.

seven

The reign of terror of the Blobs had finished. They still existed, of course, moving sedately up and down their runnels. But now people knew where to expect them, found they could be avoided and lived with. London, badly shaken, got back into the business of being a great city once again.

The grey Cumberland Blobs still radiated out from the wreckage of the project there; but they too established runnels and people shifted and adapted, flowing out to carry on life away from the Blob lines.

No publicity had been accorded the true explanation of the visitants. Humphrey Lackland and his teams still worked on the problem of cracking the hyperspace equations, and now they had the functioning physical engines and generators aboard the stranded spaceship to help. Scientists were not yet ready to construct replicas; a great deal of research had to be carried out before Earth could build her own hyperspace ships.

Things were humming along. Things were happening. Things were going to turn out right.

Only Tom Greville, in all this busy and hopeful activity, was dissatisfied.

"If only there'd been some survivors!" he said, over and over. "We can't start a war with these people, even if they've half-wrecked London and have threaded England with lines of barrenness. They just don't know they're doing it!"

He prowled the spaceship, trying to get the feel of her, trying to imagine her as she was, setting out bravely from her home planet. The records carried aboard had proved beyond doubt that his hypothesis was correct. He looked over star maps, maps that showed a Galaxy similar to the Milky Way—a spiral, not like the Great Nebula in Andromeda, but like our own galaxy, with a dust-obscured centre surrounded by five separate clouds of gas. Centimetre radio waves must have built up those pictures as they were building up the picture of our own Galaxy—but the great difference Greville knew, with wistful longing, was that the aliens could actually travel there and see for themselves.

Well, he comforted himself, if the techs did a good job on *his* spaceship, the Earth might soon go adventuring in her own Galaxy. He looked forward to that day with fierce yearning. He wanted to do something. He hated this hanging about, idle, waiting for the next phase of the problem to be flung at him.

What that phase would be he felt reasonably confident he could predict.

He told the Director: "The Cumberland aliens won't wait long for their ship to report back. The black Blobs after that fight are still heading north and as soon as they meet up with more big grey Blobs—more fireworks."

"The police have every Blob coralled off." The Director, having triumphed over Sir Pomfrey, was his old hunched and barn-owl self. "When a sphere a thousand feet in diameter suddenly appears in air, the resulting explosion is pretty severe, as we know. Equivalent to a largish bomb. All right. Our cine records show, on that thou-a-sec exposure system, that there appears a small fleck of light which is swamped right out as the Blob expands to full size. Now, if we could only get through to them in that fraction of a second—"

"We can but try. It'll have to be an automatic response system. Everything will have to be rigged ready so that as soon as the trigger goes off the radio—no," he paused, and then went on: "Can't we rig a radio truck to hose a continuous stream of radio signals—verbal and telegraphic—at a Blob so that whenever it disappears it'll have that fractional instant of possible communication time. And if we use high-speed transmission—"

"All right, Greville," Lackland waved him down. "All right! It's a good idea. We'll try it. But it's not your pigeon. I want you to absorb all you can of the aliens' systems of nuclear-power control instrumentation. It's your line of country."

"Very well, sir. I'll start right away."

At the least, it was something to do waiting for the big bang.

He kept harking back in his worried moments to that idea of trying to communicate with the aliens in the instant they switched on their X-force generators and slid along the invisible spoke of the wheel to pop into their hyperspace and our own true space. Communication was the big peace-maker. Understand your fellow man—or fellow alien—and the fists and missiles needn't fly.

The ship was crammed with scientists and technicians. With this great prize before their eyes, everyone wanted to have a chance to work in her. Never before in the history of the world had an event of such significance occurred since the

moment that mankind discovered that he was mankind. All day and night the alien ship rang and echoed with the sounds of working men and women, grappling with fresh problems and trying to use fresh concepts that could only dimly be grasped. Greville felt at home in this atmosphere. The most frustrating item of his days was the eternal waiting for someone else to finish with equipment he wished to examine and test ; everything was going on at once.

That simple thought made him pause suddenly, wondering. Now if they could hold a Blob . . . He went off to find Charlton.

"Look, Charlton," he said to the nervous little man, brooding with his two mathematical colleagues, "I'm interested in the relative time scales. Isn't it quite likely that in the aliens' own dimension, time is going along faster than it is here ? I mean," he added quickly, wanting to make his point, "they played about with small Blobs in Cumberland, presumably automatic fliers in their own solar system. But as soon as a black Blob attacked they produced large-sized spaceships in almost no time at all. It'd take months to build a ship like this."

"We've done a little work on those lines. All we can say at the moment is that it's just as likely as it is unlikely. And they could have been on the point of making the long voyage with larger ships—what's on your mind ?"

"I wonder if you could design a generator that would reverse the X-effect ? Then, perhaps we could switch it on and englobe a Blob in its field. The results might—"

"Might be most interesting !" said Charlton, leaping up excitedly and spilling papers and pencils. "We know that the X-force expands outwards from a centre of the generator, we might be able to interpose the contrary field at that moment and stop them dead. They'd never get through into our space at all !"

"Well—ye-es. I was merely thinking that we could sort of hold the Blobs up when they came through. If their time rate is more rapid than ours, then they're going to spend an awful long time going nowhere."

"Cold-blooded beast, aren't you ?" enquired Doctor Townsend, walking into the cubbyhole of the alien ship where Charlton had established himself. "They'd all die out if your theory's right."

"I know," Greville said sombrely. "I don't like the idea any more than you. But if it stops the Blobs chewing up any more of the country . . ."

One of Charlton's mathematical friends had been busily scribbling, his slip stick blurring under expert hands. Now he looked up and smiled, showing excellent plastic teeth.

"Something you said, Doctor Greville, made me wonder if we could combine two lines of approach. We're trying to beam radio signals into a Blob at its moment of weakness, when it hasn't expanded its sphere of X-force to its fullest extent. Now we have the suggestion that a generator of reversal-effect be built to produce what we might call the Y-force. If we combine these two lines of approach, we could, perhaps—" he paused cautiously, peering up at Greville.

Greville chuckled. "We're all mad around here, doctor. The wildest schemes gain immediate credence. So don't worry about any thought that we'll think you unsound."

"Well, I know much of our theory has been overturned—"

"I'll say it has! Huge holes have been punched in all the best and most cherished of Earthly theories," Charlton said with the satisfaction of a free thinker scoring a point.

"Perhaps I might hazard a shot at what you were thinking," Greville said. "With the use of the Y-force to neutralise the X-force and with the idea of getting through to the aliens in their ship in the moment of actual switching-on of the hyper-space engines, you think we might be able to place a physical object inside." He paused, and as the mathematician nodded, he ended slowly: "A man, for instance."

The high altitude suit and helmet with heaters, air supply, g-corsets, rupture-tight lacings, was the best that could be contrived. It was not a spacesuit in the sense of that word as understood by Greville after all his reading; but in view of the comforting words of Charlton, he thought it would do.

It would have to do.

Once he was catapulted into a Blob—he would be on his own in a way no man had ever been on his own before.

Charlton had said: "We've calculated out the explosion expected on an expansion rate and size of the order of the Blobs, and we find that they don't arrive with the full-size explosive force they should. This can only mean that as the Blob expands into existence it englobes some air. Otherwise they'd have been like bombs going off; big bombs."

"They still make a pretty deafening crack," Greville had answered, checking the wadding around his earphones.

Communication during the last few minutes was by his back pack radio. He stood now, in Cumberland, on the site of the old establishment, waiting.

He flexed his legs, feeling the constriction of the suit that should, in theory, stop him from being torn apart. His parachute slapped heavily against his calves as he moved.

Lackland had forced a gun on him, a blue-black automatic that fired fifteen bullets without stopping if you pressed the trigger and kept it down. Greville had protested. Guns, to him, were anachronisms that should have disappeared with the rack and the wheel.

"Take it, boy! You've no idea how you'll be received."

"And you think this is a suitable object to use as a peace offering?"

"Harrumph," grunted His Eminence.

"It seems to me that no matter what weapons I could carry with me, these aliens would have something better—or more devilish."

There was only a small group left around him now. He wanted them to go away, out of the danger area. Standing like this, muffled up, unable to feel the air of the Earth on his face or the sounds of the countryside in his ears, insulated against what might be, he wished only that it was all over.

Well away from the potential explosion area and well bunkered in concrete stood the apparatus built from the equations supplied by Charlton and his team. Four times already the Y-force projector had been turned on and four times a Blob had wavered in its growth. During that instant of time radio waves had been poured at the centre of the Blob, carrying simple coded messages that semanticists said should be recognisable to any intelligence as emanating from other intelligences. Verbal messages had been sent; soft, friendly, persuasive voices, speaking with warmth and assurance.

Greville laid little hope on those now. He felt like a man about to jump off a precipice. Even the parachute dangling behind him appeared ridiculous.

Whoever heard of using a parachute to visit a spaceship?

"We'd better clear off now, Greville." The Director consulted his watch.

"Good luck, Tom." That was Terry Ponsford, anxious, fussing, sleepless nights checking equipment giving his eyes a puffy, heavy look. Ponsford had fought for the right to go through. Greville had stubbornly insisted that he was the man to go—and now he was beginning to feel he might have been a little less dogmatic. What kept him standing there, waiting, as the others made their goodbyes and walked off, he didn't know. Maybe it was the thought that he couldn't let himself down. Maybe, after all, he was faced with a task that had to be done and after all his complaints about lack of point in life, to back out now would finish him in the eyes of everyone and in the eyes of himself. His watch hand ticked around stolidly, pointing off the minutes to the time when a Blob could be expected to appear. Over this spot they popped out of their own alien dimension with a frequency which suggested that on the other side of the dimensions lay a huge space navy base.

He ran a mental check on his equipment. Air. Food. Water. Parachute. Tape recorder. Radio. A pad with messages written by the country's leading philologists in the compact script-printing found in the books and manuals aboard the grey Blob ship.

There had been other ships and portions of ships to study since the meeting of the northward-heading black Blobs and the defending grey Blobs. Bits and pieces of spaceship had splattered down on England. Those emanating from black Blobs were found to be heartbreakingly similar to those from the grey. It might not be internecine warfare ; but it was a fight of like against like.

And those were always the worst.

Oh yes—and he had the gun, of course. For what good that was going to be.

He was thinking about the black Blobs that had erupted into destruction in the fights that must have been so ghastly to the men and women aboard the battling spaceships. Charlton and his team had said that there were significant differences in the engineering of the aliens' X-force engines in the spaceships from the black Blobs ; they handled the concepts differently and arrived at similar results by different methods. That, everyone had agreed, explained why one solar system's ships produced black and the other grey hyperspace spheres.

These thoughts were going through his head when he was suddenly upended and stood on that head.

He blinked hard. He had been on his head ; but now his body was slowly turning about an axis situated about where his stomach would be if he'd held on to it. He felt sickish and afraid. The sunshine had vanished. His suit heaters were on, triggered by thermostats. Everything around was black and blank and frightening. The slightest movement sent him swaying drunkenly, as though trying to stand upright on a rolling ball like the clowns at the circus. He felt as though he was falling—falling endlessly, and the fear that took him was primeval in its ferocity and mind-wrenching fury.

Then his scientific senses caught up with him and he willed himself to know and recognise where he was and what his betraying body was going through. His senses might tell him he was spinning down an endless greased chute ; his stomach might feel as though he was in the middle of the Irish sea in midwinter with greasy pork in his nostrils, his eyes might see only blackness—his mind knew that he had been englobed by a hyperspace sphere and that he was in free fall in a tiny segment of the alien's true space surrounding their ship.

If his theory was correct, he should now trigger open his parachute. He hauled on the ripcord. The chute—a specially prepared job with spring-operated trailer chute—opened with a jolt and he quite deliberately kicked his legs gently away and *down*.

For there was—there must be—an up and a down in the hyperspace sphere. He looked down past his feet.

The ship was there, looking like some beautiful and dangerous shark seen beneath the tropic seas of Earth.

The gravitic attraction of the ship might be very slight. There had always been the chance that she would have exerted a normal terrestrial one-gravity through the effect of her engines. And to a man falling three hundred feet or so at one gravity onto unyielding metal plates the end result would be the same as placing a gun in his mouth and pulling the trigger.

Greville drifted down to the ship, supported by the chute, the rarefied air and the light gravity compensating each other and giving the chute almost a normal appearance. He was off to one side of the ship's bows and, from his explorations of the ship that had fallen on Blatsford, he had a good idea where to go to find an airlock.

His boots struck the metal.

He could sense a difference in atmosphere ; the alive, quickening pulse of a real spaceship in actual transit, as

against the dead air of negligence aboard the smashed monster in the English village. He bundled the chute up roughly, clawing with magnetic boots to the hull, and with the silk and nylon half under his arm and half trailing behind him, walked around the curve of the hull to the airlock.

Well—the gun came in handy.

In all the hurry to equip him, no one had thought of a doorknocker.

He slammed the butt of the automatic against the airlock, hearing nothing, but feeling the power of the blows vibrating up the muscles of his arm.

A queer little thought drifted into his mind. What would the aliens be thinking, having just jumped through into hyperspace, to hear someone knocking on the hull?

Would they open up?

Or would they deal with the impossible situation in some unpleasant and unpredictable way?

If they read the sort of literature that Greville had been reading lately—they'd have precedents for this sort of situation.

In the few moments he stood there, knocking with a gun butt on the airlock of an alien starship, he had time to think of many things—and of how Tom Greville was one of the biggest darn fools in this galaxy—or the one he'd just left.

Then he stopped knocking.

Slowly, the airlock was opening.

Humphrey Lackland's waiting staff on a round-the-clock watch were ready when the grey Blob flickered and disappeared. Charlton hurried to the equipment projecting the Y-force. The grey Blob leaped into existence again. Precisely five terrestrial minutes later Charlton threw the Y-force projector on and the grey Blob disappeared.

Everyone rushed forward. Tom Greville was just sitting up, sprawled on the grass, without a parachute but with an open-ended flare gun of a type found aboard alien ships tightly clutched to his chest.

Trembling fingers wrenched his helmet and facemask and pressure-suit away. He was yellow-faced, with black pouches beneath his eyes, and he looked as tired as a man can be and not collapse—but he was smiling.

"It's all on the tape," he said. "You can listen to that. I need rest." And on the words, like a child, he was asleep.

They carried him to his old cubicle and then everyone crowded round to listen to the tape.

Tom Greville's voice began: "Your Eminence, I'm recording this in case I don't come through from this galaxy into our own safely. The Sharenti are a fine people and they're giving me a reaction pistol and agree to the five minute signal to give Charlton a chance with the Y-force projector. Well, I made contact with the Sharenti and the language was no problem; they are used to dealing with alien races and have developed a rapid teaching system, so that I now speak their language with some proficiency."

"A technique used by the English," remarked His Eminence.

"They were astonished at what I had to tell them. But the big thing is that they expressed sincere regret at the damage they had been causing in our world. But the most important item is that they're not at war with the people from the black Blobs. War is to the Sharenti like—well, it's unspeakable. They kept my gun as a curiosity—they had a sort of horrified respect and contempt for it. They've been trying to contact the ships of the black Blob people and the tragedy is that every time they make contact—merging hyperspace spheres is the technical term—the whole thing blows apart. They've given up trying to meet now in hyperspace and both ships go into their own space-time continuum. The people from the black Blobs are called some name I can't pronounce; but the slang term current aboard is Jockeys, because they come from a star in a cluster constellation called the Horse."

"Parallel dimensions," said Doctor Townsend, too pre-occupied to sip gin.

"I told them that we wanted to stop the damage being done to our world and they were at once co-operative. Charlton's Y-force generators shook them considerably. The garbled radio signals they had been receiving made them not really surprised when I knocked on the airlock, and they had been worrying in case their own X-force generators were developing unsuspected faults." On the tape Greville's words were intense with the meaning he was trying to convey, anticipating that he would not survive the return journey.

"With the information they have, they can develop a new type of engine that will produce a hyperspace sphere that will be invisible and immaterial. They can travel as they do now,

even faster, I understand, without in any way interfering with us on Earth."

"Thank God for that," said Lackland.

"I'm now cutting a good deal of technical information for Charlton and you, Your Eminence, just in case I don't . . . that is, to make sure you receive it okay. There is good chance that eventually proper vehicles can be manufactured to take us through the dimensions safely. That way we'll be exploring in four dimensions."

Lackland cut the tape recorder off. He looked up, smiling.

"Well, it seems that our troubles are over."

"Yes," said Terry Ponsford. "Thanks to one man. Tom Greville."

"I agree. Earth can look forward to a tremendous new era. Think of it—not only our own galaxy to explore with starships; but friends to make through the other dimensions!"

Doctor Townsend, Charlton, Ponsford—all of them—turned as Greville walked in. "I can't sleep," he said. "I've taken a few pills—we've work to do."

"Yes," said His Eminence. "We'll have to start an entirely new project. The government will I am sure appoint you in charge, Greville."

Tom Greville made a face. "Do I have to? I'd far sooner you took charge, as usual, Your Eminence, employed all our friends here, and called it the Greville Project. That way I might get some work done."

He smiled around on them all. "One thing," he said cheerfully. "We're finished Blob hunting."

—Kenneth Bulmer

'Gone Away—No known address'

Subscribers are reminded to keep us informed of any change of address to ensure the safe delivery of their copies as far too many issues are returned by the Post Office marked as above. Overseas subscribers are particularly requested to let us know in good time.

In an age of Content, where everyone is a Normal, civilization is likely to stagnate and die for lack of a mainspring. The mainspring could be a psychotic or a neurotic or even a paranoiac—whichever one would need careful watching.

FACELESS CARD

BY BRIAN W. ALDISS

As soon as Paul Stoneward saw Nigel Alexander come into Darwin's Dive, the killing instinct blossomed in him like a wonderful flower. I can just imagine how it was inside Paul: every little cell waking, growing teeth, turning into sharks yawning.

Even in the most static society like ours, men divide off into hunters and hunted, wolves and sheep. Paul Stoneward was a hunter born, with a way of his own about stalking the prey.

Mr. Nigel Alexander was prey. He had it stamped all over him. Ordinary citizen. Safety first. Ideas keep out. He came into the Dive at a slow trot, moving on his heels as if his toes had corns. He foamed a little from a mouth as wide as a ditch with unaccustomed exertion. Brushing past Stoneward, he sat down at his table and peered anxiously through the net-curtained window.

"Someone you don't want to see?" Stoneward asked.

Nigel Alexander looked at his table companion for the first time and then back out of the window.

"Just a business acquaintance," he muttered. "You know how it is."

His nerves all alert, Paul Stoneward looked him over, heard him absently order an old-fashioned bromo when the waiter came. Alexander was neatly dressed; Stoneward placed him as a man with money who had no notion how to spend it. A man with half his life ahead who had no notion how to use it. Prey: Handle with Cruelty.

A youngster, slick and spick, drew up outside the bar and hesitated. He danced about, then entered. He noticed Alexander, pretended to be surprised, and came over to the table. His pale face shone with pleasure.

"Hi, boss," he said eagerly. "I sure wasn't sure I didn't see that familiar back of yours ahead of me. What's it to be? Mind if I sit down?"

"I've already ordered, Johnny," Alexander said miserably. "I was just talking to my friend here . . ."

It did not dislodge the newcomer one bit. He sat down, put his elbows on the table top and nodded friendly fashion to Stoneward. "Howdy, I'm Johnny J. Flower, Mr. Alexander's chief clerk. Glad to know you."

He was the up-and-creeping generation. No dandruff. No shyness. No doubts, no halitosis. No nothing. He began to chatter happily about 'the business,' how well they were doing, how good it was working for Mr. Alexander. Mr. Alexander tried to join in the choruses, bought the boy a pep-up and fizz, smiled, nodded like an old nag.

Business could have been better. 'The N-Compass Co.' had its troubles. The public just was not buying taped books like it used and that was a hard, gilt-edged fact nobody could buck. No matter how much publicity N-Compass put out for its clients, nobody could buck that gilt-edged fact. Even Mr. Alexander with a smart head clerk like Johnny J. Flower could not buck that basic, gilt-edged fact. But they had done well to win the handling of the publicity for President da Silva's Memoirs; that was a big consignment. Everyone present would surely agree President da Silva was a big guy.

"Surely," agreed Stoneward, when their two pairs of cow eyes, hazel and green but so similar, turned to him, pleading with him to roll the ball along and say "Surely."

Why, da Silva was the guy who instigated the Amazon Basin scheme . . . billions of credits . . . da Silva was the guy who gave the big yes to the A.A.A., the Automated Agriculture Act . . . Yuh, a big guy . . . N-Compass ought to be made with da Silva's book.

Finally Johnny said he should be getting along.

"Off you go, boy; I'll be along," Mr. Alexander said, half tough, half cajoling. This obviously was not how Johnny wanted it played. He like the rest of the N-Compass staff to see him turn up with the boss, arm-in-arm, you-kiss-mine-etc. Still, he got up and went with grace, social to his clean, clean fingertips.

Paul Stoneward drank in every second of the session as if it were wine. If there was anything he loved, it was seeing the mentally dead pretend they were mentally alive. All the time that he was watching and hating Alexander and the clerk, I was sitting at the other end of the bar watching and hating Stoneward; it's my profession.

"Nice boy, Johnny. Don't know how I'd manage without him," Alexander said, wiping under his collar with a silk handkerchief. He was getting flabby. His new collar made it clear he needed a new neck.

"But you were trying to dodge him," Stoneward said lightly. He could prize this old fool open like a piggy-bank.

"Oh, well, yes . . . That's another thing. It's just—well, never mind. I don't think I even caught your name, sir. Paul Stoneward? Fine; never forget a name—doesn't pay in my line of business, no sir. You see, Johnny is a very smart and bright young feller—well, you saw for yourself . . ."

"You wouldn't say Johnny was a bore?" Paul Stoneward put the delicate point tentatively. You would not say Johnny was a smarm, a snide, a creeper, a dully without one inkling, an ostrich, a jerk who was galloping blind from cradle to grave (like you, Mr. Alexander)—in short, an ideal, approved, integrated citizen of this approved and misbegotten Age of Content?

"Why, Johnny's a real live-wire, Mr. Stoneward," Alexander said, with mild indignation. "I only said to my wife this morning, 'Penelope, Johnny's going places'; and I'm not a man to make a mistake."

Not much, you old blabbermouth. Of course you can't see what Johnny is, just as the blind can't see the blind. And

what the hell places do you think Johnny could possibly be going to, when there are no longer any places worth going to? And what sort of romance do you and Penelope make when you are in your bed clothes? And if you knew I *long*—but *long*—to tear your typical existence apart from top to bottom . . .

"It is of course a very great honour and pleasure to meet a man of your perspicacity and position," Stoneward said, crinkling his eyebrows into Mexican moustaches to increase the unction. "My place is only just round the corner from here. May I ask you up there with me now? I would be delighted to mix you another old-fashioned bromo."

At once, Alexander looked nervous. His face took on the puckered look it had worn when he first encountered the bar. Stoneward could not quite account for the expression. God-dam it, even these Normals had their little personal quirks; since it irritated him to feel he did not know every last grey inch of Alexander's soul, he promptly forgot the thought.

Alexander glanced at his watch.

"The business . . ." he said apologetically. "Most hospitable of you . . ."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Alexander," Stoneward said, lowering his eyes and easing huskiness into his voice. "I should have remembered what a busy man you are. It's just—well, I'm lonely, let's face it. There's no Penelope for me . . . Just my little old self . . . Existence sometimes grows a wee bit . . . solitary."

Don't ham it too much, kid, and don't spoil it all by laughing in his face. You've got him now; look, his eyes are misting. Love in a mystery. These slobs are stuffed rotten with kindness—you just have to touch the right button and out it oozes.

"I'm genuinely sorry to learn that, Mr. Stoneward," the boss of N-Compass was saying. "Say, call me Nigel, why don't you, and I'll call you Paul. I like to be friends with folk. I guess we all get lonely at times—even a happy-married man like myself. Like I always say, Paul, life is just a big question mark. Sometimes at night, when your eorns are playing you up . . ."

"You mean—you mean you *will* come on round to my place?" Stoneward said, brightening convulsively. He could not bother even to put on a genuine act—this Alexander was too rancid to smell a stink. Subtlety is wasted on suckers.

"Well, I didn't say that . . ."

"Ah, come on—*Nigel*. You'd like my room. Besides . . . well, I've come to regard you as a friend, I guess."

"Don't like to say no," Alexander murmured, rising obediently to his feet when Stoneward did. For all his smart suiting, he looked baggy, like a fat sheep off to a ritzy abattoir, as Stoneward took his arm and led him into the sedate streets.

I left shortly after but did not follow them. Instead, I took a taxi to H.Q. Man, was I mad !

Mr. Nigel Alexander was really uneasy. He chewed a toothpick to splinters. He plucked at the armpits of his shirt to ease the damp patches off his skin. When he spoke, standing in the middle of Stoneward's room, he gazed unhappily down at the squared toes of his shoes.

"Er . . . you aren't an Artist, by any chance, Paul, are you? No offence, I mean, and you'll have guessed by now that I'm a pretty liberal man, but I mean I just have to ask the once. These pictures on your walls . . . And that naked statue . . ."

Stoneward perched himself on the edge of his desk, swung his neat legs, folded his competent hands, smiled dagger-fashion, looked artistic.

"Why now, Nigel," he said with sham surprise, "you know as well as I do that such things as artists don't exist any more ! This is the Age of Content, when all maladjusted and non-functional groups like artists or fictioneers or drunkards have melted away. Everyone is adjusted, normal, *happy*."

"Sure, sure," Alexander said hurriedly, nodding rather too much. "I just thought . . . these pictures . . . I mean, don't they rather look back to the old decadent pre-Content set-up ? I mean, I know you are unmarried . . ."

Stoneward walked over to the drug cabinet and began to mix two old-fashioneds, saying casually as he did so, "You could say I was an artist in a way. There's something else that has died out and is now forgotten or forbidden : I'm an artist in the art of life."

This floored Alexander. He adjusted his damp shirt again and wiped his fingertips on the silk handkerchief. He tried a laugh.

"Oh, you are mistaken there, Paul. Your concept, if you'll pardon me, is awry. Life is not an *art*. It's—well, it's natural. I don't intend any rudeness when I say you are mistaken. But life, well, it's just something you *live*, I guess. I know Penelope

would see it like that. You just live life ; it doesn't need any thought. Not the way business needs thought, for instance. I can't see what you mean. I mean, I just don't see it."

Carrying the two glasses carefully, Stoneward brought them over to the low oval table and set them down. He produced a box of mescahales and a lighter and set those down. He waved his hand to the chairs, sitting in one when his guest dubiously did and curling his long legs under him.

"Penelope is a very attractive name," he said ingratiatingly.

"Oh yes, a very attractive name. My favourite name, in fact," Alexander said, grateful as a dog for the abrupt change of subject.

"Well," Stoneward said, raising his glass, "Here's to the widow of bashful fifteen and to the cadaver of forty, to the clean little woman who's slightly unclean and the sports girl who's out-and-out sporty."

"I hadn't heard that one before," Alexander said, with glum embarrassment, again examining his toe-caps. He leant well forward and pursed his thick mauve lips to drink.

"Let's talk intimately," Stoneward said, as if struck by this sudden good idea. "Just you and I, Mr. Nigel Alexander, with no souls barred. In every age, in every clime, a man's or a woman's breast harbour secrets— nothing bad, just little sensitive things to be kept away from the common gaze. Clouds of immortality and suchlike lush things. Let's have ours out now, right here, confidentially, and see how intimate we can get. What say?"

A driblet went down the plumpening chin and plopped on the table top. The hankie appeared and mopped the plop. The plump hand waved away a proffered mescahale.

"Frankly, I don't follow your meaning, Paul. I have no secrets. Well—business secrets, naturally . . . But I think you are presuming just a little on our acquaintanceship, if I may be allowed to put it that way. Secrets? Why should a normal man have secrets?"

"Penelope," Stoneward barked, shooting out his legs, dropping his voice and repeating, "Penelope : no secrets from her? Not even teeny, weeny ones?"

"No, no, not even—er, teeny, weeny ones. I can say that quite honestly. I love my wife very dearly, Mr. Stoneward, the way a decent citizen should, please believe me. Any secrets we may have are very properly shared. Furthermore, as a

property owner, I feel I have every right . . . every right to say . . . the gosh . . . every right . . ."

He had drained his glass and now he was asleep. He rolled over like a bullock on clover, beginning to snore as the knock-out drops took firmer hold of him. The lines of his face grew relaxed and generous.

"Every right!" Stoneward echoed, standing over him. "Yes, you've every right to be caught like a porker in a trap. You didn't want to come here, yet you had to, because you scented loneliness, sniffed it right up your old nostrils. You thought it was like calling to like, you pomaded porker, because inside—though you don't know it!—you're just as miserable as all the other Normals. No, that's foisting my diagnosis onto him. He hasn't enough know-how to be miserable; that takes talent. He's just a bucket of lard."

Bending, he felt distastefully inside the breast pocket of the sleeping man, drawing out his wallet. In it was a red identity card stamped NORMAL. Sure it was normal—it was so normal, only one man in a million was anything else these days. On the back cover of the folder, under the bovinely solemn reproduction of Mr. Nigel *Hamilton* Alexander's physiognomy, were his home and his business addresses.

"Good," Stoneward said. He picked the lighter from the table, ignited it, and extinguished it against the grey spread of Alexander's underjowl. The sleeping man never stirred.

Saying 'Good' again, Stoneward went over to the phone and dialled. He had thought of an artistic touch. Switching off the vision, he waited for a female voice to coo "N-Compass Co. Coverage and Publicity," and then asked for Johnny Flower.

"The boss won't be in today, Johnny," he said apologetically, when the clerk's dime-a-dozen purr replied. "I wouldn't like this bit of news to get around, but Nigel Alexander is off on a benzedrine bust with a busty junkie called Jean. She'll toss him right back at you when she's finished with him."

He cut off the incoherent noises at the other end of the line, smiled affectionately to himself and dialled through to Civilian Sanctions. He tuned the vision circuits in again in time to see the girl at the main desk switch him right through to the Commissioner.

"Beynon?" Stoneward said. He was always clipped, staccato, every inch the operative with Commissioner Beynon,

because that was how he responded to Beynon's personality. "I'm on a new consignment from date. Target : Citizen BIOX 95005, Alexander, N.H. Usual objective : to awaken the man's dormant powers of life-awareness. Strictly off the record, I don't think Alexander has any to awaken."

"Don't make this job too expensive," Beynon warned. "The Peace Department are having a stiff enough job as it is convincing the Police that you have Congress backing. I advise you to go easy, Stoneward."

"Message received and understood," Stoneward said. "Everything fine and formal, Normal."

Beynon cut contact, turning to me. "How I'd like to see that louse behind bars !" he exclaimed. "I can quite grasp that ultimately he may be doing good, but I don't like to see nice, honest citizens suffer ; and I *don't* like the obvious pleasure he gets out of it all. What do you think he's up to, Kelly ?"

"He'll be after Alexander's wife now," I told the Commissioner, "because that's the way his nasty little mind works."

She stood with a vase full of cactus dahlias in one hand. She wore a little apron over a fawn and white dress. She had curly chestnut hair and surprising grey eyes. She was slenderly tenderly shaped. She was some years younger than her husband. She smiled rather helplessly, entirely charmingly.

"I was just doing the flowers," she said.

"I won't keep you long, Mrs. Alexander—Penelope," Stoneward said ; he had changed into a dark, dapper suit and looked ceaseless, creaseless. He put a calculated amount of warmth into his voice and added, "I've so often heard your husband call you Penelope, it seems more natural for me to call you that too. Would you mind ?"

"How long have you known my husband, Mr. Stoneward ?" she asked, smiling but ignoring his question.

"We've been friends for years, really close friends," Stoneward said, clasping his hands ingeniously to suggest ingenuousness. "I'm just so surprised he never mentioned me to you. I mean . . . why should he have secrets from you ?"

The little jab did not appear to sink in. Perhaps Penelope also would prove to be insensitive—but he found himself hoping not. That gentle exterior, it should not be hard to wound.

"Why indeed?" she said. "How long did you say you have known my husband?"

"I've known Ni since . . . let's see . . . Oh, since seven years or more. We met when he was blowing the fanfares for my book on Human Sex, and that was in twenty fifteen. Come to think of it, perhaps that's why he never mentions me; sex isn't always considered respectable. What sort of a reception does it get in this house, Penelope?"

She set the vase with a bump on the window ledge and turned smartly. This girl's legs consisted of an infinite number of points it was imperative to kiss. Steady, Stoneward, the outward display of her might look lively, but the vital grey matter would be dead: how else explain her marriage to N.H.A.?

"If you have anything important to say, Mr. Stoneward, would you please say it and leave? I am rather busy this morning."

"Yes, I've something to say," he told her, sitting on the arm of a chair and stretching his legs. He laughed ruefully. "Trouble is, I'm not keen to say it. I'm afraid you will be shocked."

"If you will tell me, I will tell you if I am shocked," she said, attempting to humour him.

"Okay. Penelope, sweet though you are, Nigel has left you for another woman, the cad."

"You are talking nonsense," she said.

"I am speaking the truth. He has tired of you at last, the old dog. Every man his own Romeo."

"You are talking nonsense. I don't believe you have even met my husband," she said sharply.

"He has gone off with a blonde double-breasted girl called Jean with hep hips and sigh-size thighs who is old enough to be his mother and big enough to be his father," he lied.

She picked up the vase of dahlias again, in case a weapon were needed. All the interlocking softnesses of her face had frozen hard.

"Get out!" she shouted. "You're drunk."

"No, it's true!" Stoneward said, bursting into laughter despite himself. He had spoilt such dramatic scenes before merely because his sense of humour had run away with him—he kept thinking of funny details with which to adorn his theme. "It's all true, Penelope! This wicked girl Jean is old

enough to be Ni's mother. How do I know, you ask ? Because she's *my* mother ! She sure gets around ! But this time she's got a square."

He rolled into the chair, laughing. Hell, what did it matter how you played your hand when you knew you couldn't put a foot wrong? That's what is known as a hand-to-foot existence. It didn't matter if this chick believed him or not—he had Congress backing. And a free chuckle.

Penelope had moved out with those nicely hinged knees to the call booth in the hall. She dialled angrily and spoke to someone. Sobering, Stoneward sat up and listened. He guessed she was calling Johnny Flower, wanting to know if hubby was under control at the all-N-Compassing office. This was rich ! By the shattered look on her face when she returned, slowly, lowly, he knew that he had guessed rightly and Johnny had passed on his little tittle-tattle.

"I'm truly sorry, Mrs. Alexander," he said, returning to seriousness to hand out a really corny line. "It isn't that he doesn't love you any more, it's just that he fell into temptation. His spirit was willing and his flesh was weak. Try to take it bravely. I don't think he'll ever come back to you, but you can always find another man, you know. You're man-shaped !"

"I don't believe you," she said and burst into tears. With a gallant effort, she tried to check herself but failed ; she settled herself in a chair to cry more comfortably. Stoneward went across to her on hands and knees, like a pious panther, when he smoothed her hair, she flicked her head away, continuing to cry.

"You shouldn't cry," he said. "Alex was always unfair to you. He left you here shut away. He kept secrets from you. He kept money from you. He never told you about me . . . I can't bear to hear you cry. It sounds like termites in a tin beam."

He put his arms round her, cuddling her. In a minute he was kissing her, her grief and his greed all mixed together in a bowl of tears.

"Leave me alone," she said. "Who are you ? Why did you come and tell me this ?"

"I thought I'd made that clear, Penelope. Ni told me to come and tell you. He's bored to death and he's quitting—going to start life anew, a-nude."

Though she had been crying, she had not really believed till now. Something Stoneward said seemed to have penetrated and made her accept the situation as he presented it.

"I can't believe it," she said, which is what all women say when they first begin to believe.

Stoneward neither contradicted nor accepted her statement. He just crouched by her, naked under his clothes.

"Whatever am I going to do?" Penelope asked aloud at last, speaking not to him but to herself.

"I love you," he said simply. "I always have. Every word your husband has told me about you has been music to my ears. I've treasured the smallest fact about you, Penelope. I know your vital measurements, the size of stocking you take, the make of soap you use, which breakfast cereal you prefer, the names of your favourite movie and phoney stars, how long you like to sleep nights. Unless you have secrets from Ni, I know everything about you, for you as a Normal are only the sum of these pretty facts. Come with me to my flat, I'll take care of you—worshipping from afar all the time, have no fear! My research days for my magnum opus are over!"

She looked at him doubtfully.

"You know what," she said. "I think that right now I want to get away out of here. I can't think here at all. Will you kindly wait five minutes while I just go pack a bag, Mr. Stoneward? Then I'll be with you."

"Your eyes have spent their days drifting among the starry nights," he said dreamily.

Penelope laughed, got up a little jerkily and left the room. Paul Stoneward buried his face in the warm patch she had created in the chair, drumming his fists on the chair arm. People were all the same, all the same, even this golden girl, just a puppet . . . all pulp puppets. He nursed his terrible secret: once people ceased to have any power over you, they were absolutely in your power. He could almost have cried about it.

He rose, walked quietly into the hall and dialled Civilian Sanctions again. When he had given Beynon his orders, he returned to the living room to await Penelope. She appeared after a quarter of an hour, entirely composed, clutching a tan suitcase a little too tightly. Stoneward took her arm and led her out of the house, mincing exaggeratedly by her soft side.

As they walked down the drive, he looked back over his shoulder. Brick house with pink and pistachio trim, lawn with

pink roses florabounding all over the place in each corner, mail box on its white post at the foot of the drive-way down the slope. Stoneward laughed. This popsie was really leaving home.

"Coffee?" she said suspiciously. "What's that?"

"When you've done pacing up and down, it's an old time euphoric with taste additives," Stoneward said, setting the cups down and widening his nostrils over the steam. It was exhilarating to have the three dimensional shape of her in his room.

He had rolled Nigel Hamilton Alexander, snores and all, under his bed, and stuffed a sponge into his mouth. He had chased round, half-serious, half-laughing, straightening out the room after he had let her in. Penelope hardly noticed him; she walked up and down the room like a little caged—well, a little caged cutie. You could see the exercise doing her ankles good; they looked fine. Not so her soul. Penelope was still in a state of shock. No resilience, these Normals—except physically, of course, in the case of present company.

Present company drank down her java like a good girl and heeled over onto the rug. Stoneward, who had been watching like a lynx, caught her as she fell, thought several thoughts, licked his lips, but straightened up and let her sleep.

Business first. Congress should have of his best.

Hustling into the bedroom, legs moving like dapper nutcrackers, head cool as a safe, he pulled several stage properties out of a drawer and flung them onto the bed, ruffling the covers as he did so. Then he seized the mortal remains of N-Compass Co's chief and rattled them roughly back to life.

"Penelope . . . stop . . . lemme get to the . . . ugh . . ." Alexander muttered, chewing his way through a king-size mist.

"Don't give me that crud about Penelope after what you've been doing to Jean," Stoneward said nastily. "Look at the mess the pair of you have made of my bedroom, you dirty old romp. Get up and get out."

Heavily, Alexander pulled himself to the bedside and sat on it. His dull eye, moving like a whale in heavy seas, finally lighted on a female garment by the pillows.

"Jean left you that pair with her love," Stoneward said. "Said to tell you she had another pair some place. Now come on, snap out of it, Nigel."

The older man buried his head in his hands. After some minutes of silent battle, he launched himself to his feet, exclaiming, "I got to get back home and sort all this out with Penelope."

"Home! Penelope!" Stoneward echoed. "Don't be immoral, old sport. You can't have it both ways. The past has ceased to exist for you. You were a Normal, now you're not. Normals don't behave like you have; your card will have to be stamped 'Neurotic' now!"

"You're just confusing me, mister," Alexander said stubbornly. "I got to get home."

"That's what I'm telling you, Alexander the Grunt. You've got no home. You've stepped outside the bounds of normal behaviour and so your Normal life has ceased to exist. Face up to it like a man."

"I got to get home. That's all I know."

"Don't you love me any more, Ni?" Stoneward asked, peeping at his watch. "We used to be such buddies in the old days. Remember the Farellis, the Vestersons, the vacations in Florida? Remember the pistachio shoots off Key West?"

"Ah, shut up, you give me bellyache," Alexander said, "not that I wish to be insulting and I'd like to make it clear I regret it if I have committed a nuisance on your premises."

"Spoken like a man!" Stoneward cried delightedly. "That's what I call breeding, pal. It's all you have left, believe me."

"Just help me get a taxi, will you?"

They went down onto the street, quiet, well-manicured street full of ditto people. A cab pulled up for them. Paul Stoneward bundled in after his victim, who did not protest beyond a grunt. He glanced at his watch again; but his timing had always been faultless and he could have patted himself with approval.

"2011, Springfield," Alexander said to the driver.

The drive took them fifteen minutes. The cabby pulled up uncertainly by a big advertisement hoarding. Stoneward dragged his companion onto the sidewalk, crammed money into the driver's hand and said, "Beat it, bud."

He stood there, hands on hips, posing for his own pleasure and whistling the opening theme of Borodin's Second Symphony, while Alexander moved unhappily back and forth, a bull bereft of its favourite china shop. Before them loomed a big hoarding boosting Fawdree's Fadeless Fabrics.

"It's gone ! My house—my home has gone !"

"Don't say I didn't warn you," Stoneward said.

Crying as if in physical pain, Alexander ran behind the hoarding. Nothing there—just a flat lot with a little dust still hanging above it. (The Civic Demolition boys must have worked their disintegrators with real zest !) Alexander burst into howls of anguish.

"You're having a wail of a time, Alec Sander," Stoneward said, taking the other by the arm. "Now why don't you listen to me, your uncle P.? You're at last—although a solid forty-five—getting a glimmer of what life is about. You're learning, man ! Life is not a substantial thing ; you can't guarantee any one minute of it, past, present or future ; you can't salt it away in moth-balls. You thought it was secure, safe, snug, something as solid and predictable as the foot in your boot, didn't you ? You were wrong by at least one hundred and eighty degrees. Life is a dream, a dew. Fickle, coy and hard to please, prone to moth. Nothing is left to you now, man, but dreams. You never had a dream in your life. Now you have actively to start dreaming. Now—at last !"

"Penelope," Alexander said. He pronounced the single word, then he took out his silk handkerchief and blew one forlorn and faded chord on his nose. The breeze turned over a page of his hair and he said, "Penelope, you don't understand . . . Penelope, I can't live without her, mister. We . . . shared everything. I can't explain. We shared . . . had secrets."

"You had secrets ?" Stoneward whispered, leaning forward. "Now you're really giving, man. Let me inside the catwalks of your psychology, if you'll pardon the dirty word, and I'll see if I can help at all."

"There was one secret," the middle-aged man said, weeping without restraint now as he talked, "one secret that was very dear to us. I suppose everyone must have something. You have such a sharp way of being sympathetic, Paul, I can't be sure if you'll understand. Remember how I was trying to dodge away from Johnny J. Flower in the bar, whenever it was ? This morning. I like him. I like Johnny. It wasn't that I didn't like him ; and he likes me—you could see that. I wanted it to stay that way. I *want* him to like me. I don't know if you'll understand . . . You see, I didn't want Johnny to find out what a bore I am. I always dodge him if I can.

People bore me—except you, Paul, you're my only friend. I don't mind being bored ; it's, well, kind of comfortable—you know you're safe when you're bored. But I know I am boring, too, and that's the secret Penelope and me had . . . I never wanted Johnny to find out. *She* knew I knew I was a bore and she—well, she just understood, that's all. I'll never find anyone like her again and now she's gone. Gone, man."

Paul Stoneward did not even laugh. He had seen right down into the depths which had hitherto been closed to him, and he was frightened. Without another word, he turned away, walking off with hunched shoulders past the hoarding, down the road, leaving Alexander crying on an empty lot.

By the time he got home, his high spirits had returned. He rang Beynon again.

"Your hair looks heliotrope on this screen, Commissioner," he said, "or did you dye it? Either way, I like it how you have it." And he launched into a long and unwise cracking account of what he had done and was going to do on the Alexander case.

Beynon sighed heavily when the screen finally dimmed, and turned to me. He looked not unlike Alexander, heavy, solid, without dreams.

"Well, Kelly, do you feel the same as I do?" he asked. Commissioner Beynon always lead with a query.

I nodded. "Paul's way of handling things is all wrong," I said. "It's not only a question of whether neurotics aren't born not made—Stoneward produces crazy, mixed-up people efficiently enough, but they all have vacuums inside them by the time he's through, they can't create after he has been at them. The reason's simply that he himself has a vacuum inside. Underneath, he knows it, too ; of that I'm certain."

"Do we let him carry on?"

That's the godawful curse with Normals ; I know well enough how Paul Stoneward feels about them. Even a man like Beynon, lousy with authority, passes the buck whenever he can. Basic lack of imagination, I suppose.

"I know I have the same stamp on my folder as he does," I said, "and that should make me on his side. But Paul's just out there doing mischief from which no good can come. Let me get onto Senator Willcroft at Peace Department."

"You can't worry him !" Beynon said in alarm.

"Can't I? Sit back and watch me, Beynon. Willcroft's in charge of this project and I'm going to have it out with him straight. I want to save that girl if there's still time."

It was dark when Stoneward got Penelope to the lot. The afternoon's infant breeze had become a wind with a will of its own. Alexander had trundled off, maybe to the nearest river. Callously Paul loaned the girl a torch, watching the erratic beam of it hunt for lawn and ramblers and verandah and brick with pink and pistachio trim. When she fell onto nyloned knees head drooping, he went over, squatting on his haunches by her.

Penelope had found a dahlia. It must have been one of the bunch she was tending before Stoneward appeared; the disintegrators had missed it. She clutched it, her eyes bowl-full of tears. Almost it seemed as if the flower brought her understanding.

"Whatever you are, you are wicked," she said unsteadily. "You have done *all*—all this. I don't know why or how . . . You must be the devil."

"The devil was a bore without a sense of humour; I'm not flattered," Stoneward said.

She brought her hand, that pebble-smooth hand, up and smote him over his handsome mouth.

"Why?" she said, her voice rising unmanageably, "just tell me *why*, for pity's sake, have you done this to us?"

"I love you, so I will tell you," he said, calmed by the hurt of her hand. "I work for civilization. I love civilization more than any blank and pretty-faced mediocrity in the world. Unfortunately civilization has got stuck right in a rut. When sociology really got itself established as a science at the end of last century, formulae were developed which enabled everyone to fit exactly into his or her social niche; maybe you've heard? And for anyone with any little residual twinges of emotion, a wide range of drugs was made tastily available. The end result was the complete—well, almost complete—banishment of mental upset from the world. Unprecedented calm and content settled like fog, and this is me lamenting it. Three boozy boos for the Age of Content."

They squatted together facing each other, the fallen torch casting shadows upward over their figures. Penelope still clutched the dahlia but had forgotten it. In the blind-blowing

dark, they had lost their identities. They might have been things on Easter Island.

"Civilization is dying day by day, because the people who made it and continued it have gone," Stoneward said, speaking naturally now he was saying something he believed. "Everything we value was produced by malcontents or psychotics—men who could not shape themselves to the world as it was, and tried to reshape it to fit them. Our first ancestor who came down out of a tree only did it because the trees weren't good enough for him. The guy who invented the wheel was just too goddammed cussed to lend a hand with the sledge like the rest. The guy who first kindled fire only did it to prove to himself that he was a cut above the other jerks. So it's been all along. Your inventor, your artist—he's got something to work out. But now, *now* no-one has a thing to work out!"

"Except you," Penelope said.

Stoneward rested his finger on her knees, playing a small, silent tune there.

"I'm the one in a million who still has a chip on his shoulder; no society is absolutely perfect, thank God!" he said. "Yes, Penny, Pennyworth, Penelope, my darling Pente Loop, I am the Joker in the pack. The few neurotics left in the country are now all Government employed, trying to cope with the dangers of stagnation. We act as random factors, jerking dull citizens here and there into awareness. You Normals live in life as if it were a house: it's not, it's a tiger ride. I've sold Congress my own way of waking people—at least for a trial period. It's violent but it's effective; I reckon you'll admit that, Penelope. You'll never be the same girl again, will you, eh?"

She did not answer, just looked at him as if he had melted.

"Reckon old Cornbags Alexander has blo-o-own away to limbo," Stoneward sighed. "You'll have to grow some real dreams now, little girl, now you see what a false dream security was . . ."

"So you even have an intellectual front to cover all you've done," she exclaimed slowly. "You wanted to see into me, not realising how reciprocal the process was—and consequently I've seen into you. You're—you're just miserably unhappy, Paul. You boost yourself up as a joker, but you're not. You're not even the knave. You're just the extra, faceless card that sometimes gets stuck into a new deck. You're—

even with Congress behind you !—you're nothing, you can *be* nothing . . ."

He had put his sharp elbows on his thighs and rested his chin in his hands as if he was listening his ears off. Instead, he was crying his eyes out. The little crystals elongated and flashed down to the torchlight.

"Paul," she said sharply.

Paul Stoneward could not cry at all elegantly. He needed practice, that guy.

"I just . . . I can't go any further," he said brokenly. "Penny, you got to help pick me up."

It was about then I came round the corner of Fawdree's Fadeless Fabrics with the gun in my hand, out of breath and angry, but so happy to have made Senator Willcroft see things my way. Strange to reflect how that first view of my future wife should be of her with her arms round the man I killed.

Even the hunters are hunted : in this or any other rotten age.

—Brian W. Aldiss

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TRADING POST

BY EDWARD MACKIN

I was sitting on one of those elaborate, but uncomfortable stone seats set around Victory Plaza, and holding a one-man ways-and-means committee with particular reference to some of the eating places in the area, when someone's hands were placed over my eyes, and a voice uttered the time-honoured formula : " Guess who ? "

It wasn't a debt-collector or a policeman, that was fairly certain. Debt-collectors and policemen are very serious-minded individuals indeed, and not given to trivial by-play of this nature ; but I couldn't imagine who else it might be.

" Santa Claus," I hazarded, hopefully, although it was the wrong time of the year.

" You could be right," said the voice, and the hands were removed.

I found myself gazing at a very familiar, and portly figure. " Meerschraft !" I exclaimed, holding out my hand. " The fat, the amiable, the generous ! Meerschraft, old friend, you

are an angel from Heaven ! I have always said so. Could you possibly lend me a fiver ?”

The smile on his pudgy features was whipped off with panic rapidity, and a frown replaced it. “No, I can’t,” he replied, flatly, and sat down.

“Swine !” I said, and tipped my hat over my eyes as a sign that I had lost interest in him.

After a while he tapped me on the shoulder. “Belov,” he said, diffidently, “I have a nice little job for you.”

I shoved my hat back, and glared at him. “I can just imagine,” I told him. “What happened ? Did you get paid for a job you couldn’t do, you fat snake ? How many computers have you wrecked ? Do you want me to take the responsibility, then, you bloated toad ?”

“How you do go on,” he complained, shaking his head. He pulled something from his pocket, and showed it to me. It appeared to be a large pill. I took it off him, and examined it, but without much interest. “Take it,” he told me, and grinned. “It will set you up for the week.”

“What is it ?” I asked him. “An instant meal pill.” I’d heard of the things, and I was desperate enough to swallow it.

He shook his head. “No,” he informed me. “It’s an alarm clock.”

“Marvellous,” I said, uneasily. “What next !”

I handed it back to him, and stood up.

“You don’t believe me, do you ?” he frowned.

“Of course I believe you,” I reassured him. “It’s just that I can’t stand alarm clocks. They always go off too early, and the modern, electronic ear buzzer is worse. It shakes the brain loose. No offence, old friend,” I added, quickly. “You should polish the bells on that one. They’re looking a bit dull.”

He took me by the arm, and pulled me down beside him. “You’ve got it all wrong,” he said. “This pill is, of course, a chemical alarm. A powerful sleep-inducer comes first, followed by an eight-hour barrier layer, and then a brain-jerker. After this there’s another barrier layer, and then the whole cycle commences again. Twenty-three separate layers. Enough for a week. Take one of these things every Sunday night, and you are right in the industrial groove. You get your full quota of sleep, and you do your stint with unfailing regularity right through the week to the next pill.”

"Sounds like someone's peddling a nervous breakdown," I said. "What's the job? And if it's selling these things I should like to remind you that I am a cyberneticist. I have my principles."

"Ten per cent would kick those in," he sneered.

He was right, of course, the dog! One has to live.

He put the pill away. "You don't have to worry about this slave-slug. It's the belt that's producing the things that's the trouble. Something happens inside the packing head that just doesn't make sense. Not to me, anyway. The bugs must be king-size; but I can't pin them down. So, I thought that your more unorthodox approach to control mechanisms might have more success. The kind of training I had doesn't fit one to cope with the palpably impossible."

"My training was mostly in the field," I told him. "I'm a practical man. I think in terms of solid circuitry. My friend, you can take a Mills-Bonde tank through a bank of computers, digital or analogue, and I'll have them working again inside a week. That's the kind of cyberneticist I am."

"Yes, yes, of course," he agreed, hastily. "And I'm quite sure that you are the man for the job. Anyway, if we, that is to say you, can't fix it I risk prosecution. I had an advance, you see . . ."

"And you've spent it?"

He nodded.

"Good luck!" I said. "Your problem of food and accommodation is solved for the next three months at least. I hope you get a dry cell."

"Just a minute." He dug into an inside pocket, and produced a couple of cream and gold fivers, pressing them into my hand. "That's all I have left," he told me. "If you could manage to fix the thing I'd be most grateful."

"I'll bet you would," I said, pocketing the money. "I'll take ninety per cent of the remaining fee," I added. "I am not a hard man."

"No," he said, bitterly. "You're just a greedy one."

I patted him on the back. "Cheer up," I said. "Your troubles are over. Old Belov is in charge."

"I've an awful feeling that they are just beginning," he remarked, sombrely. He stood up. "I suppose we'd better get over there."

"Not until I've eaten. I can't think on an empty stomach. We'll take a helicab to Emilio's."

We walked into Emilio Batti's little restaurant, and sat down at a small table near the old-fashioned, metal-topped counter, where Emilio was busy cutting sandwiches. His tall, white chef's hat seemed to wilt when he spotted me, and he ignored my cheery wave.

After a while I went over to him. "Good morning, old friend," I said, with a smile. "How's business?"

He frowned at me. "Just this minute it take a dip," he said, pointedly. "What you want, huh?"

"What about a nice porterhouse steak, smothered in onions, followed by a large helping of your inimitable cherry pie, with plenty of fresh cream?"

"What about the money?" he asked, waving the knife about. "You still owe me nineteen-pounds-four-and-twopence." He banged his huge fist on the counter, and the whole place shook. Dust from the neglected ceiling fell everywhere, and the customers began to take evasive action. "You want I should go bankrupt?" Again the fist descended, and a heap of cheese sandwiches tilted towards me. I stood back and let them fall. I never did like cheese sandwiches.

"Nothing doing!" he bellowed, and his chef's hat trembled with the indignation he obviously felt. Six-feet-six, and nearly twenty stone, he glowered at me. "What you think pays the bills, huh? Promises?" He leant towards me. "Belov, one of these days I push you through the mincer, and get my money back in meat patties!"

I slapped a note on the counter. "Take it out of that, you great overfed slob!" I told him, and backed off a couple of paces.

He grabbed the money, and shoved it in a drawer. "My apologies, Mr. Belov," he said, making a ponderous bow; "but we are right out of porterhouse steak." He grinned. "'Ave a meat pattie."

"May lightning strike me if I do!" I said.

But that's what I had. I ate it with my feet off the floor. It was either that or cheese sandwiches.

Crampton's Medical Supplies said the legend outside the dingy-looking premises on Fourth Level. Meerschraft opened the door, and we went in. Sitting at the desk was a gaunt-faced individual of perhaps forty. There was a deep frown of concentration on his forehead. I glanced at the paper he had been scribbling on. It was covered with abstruse

mathematical calculations, and odd bits of pharmaceutical hooha.

I shuddered. Mathematics as a science gives me the pip. It can't explain the superlatively important things like love and beauty, trust and honour, to say nothing of Emilio's cherry pie; but it can describe in mesonic detail the ultra-cosmic bomb, which is the latest of a long line of horrors, each more fearsome than the last.

The astounding fact is that if it weren't for this counting-house jabberwocky the things could never have existed. Nowadays, even the doctors use a kind of slide rule, with symptoms on one side, and probable complaints on the other. Tcha! I have no use for such instruments. Figures only confuse my finer intelligence. A screwdriver is all old Belov needs, and perhaps a small hammer, to fix any computer ever made.

"This is Mr. Crampton," said Meerschraft.

"Mr. Bailey!" snapped the other. "I took over from Crampton. Can't you get anything right?"

"God bless you!" I said. "How's your uncle Bill?"

I picked up a small plastic tube from the desk, and examined it. It was that medical maid-of-all-work the humble aspirin.

Bailey looked from me to Meerschraft, and back to me again.

"Perhaps I can explain . . ." began Meerschraft.

"Shut up!" snapped Bailey. He glared at me. "I have no uncle Bill," he said.

"Tough luck!" I commiserated. "Have one of these." I offered him the tube.

He snatched it from me, and banged it back on the desk.

"Who is this fellow?" he demanded of poor Meerschraft.

"Hek Belov," he said, with a despairing look at me. "He's a—er, cyberneticist. A very good one," he added, swallowing hard. "He may be able to help with our problem."

"Another incompetent jackass, I suppose," Bailey surmised. "Let's see what he can do, then." He pushed his chair back, and stood up. "Come on," he growled. "Time's money. I have some very urgent orders to get out." He went through a door at the back of the office, and we followed him.

"I don't like the company you keep," I told Meerschraft.

"He's a mean man," agreed my friend through his teeth. "If you don't come up with a solution my goose is cooked." He dabbed his sweating brow with an oil-stained handkerchief.

"Leave it to old Belov," I said, patting him on the back. "He won't even singe your tail feathers."

It was a small production unit with nine separate lines. A fully-automated one-man business. The computer proved to be a Rike Mk. III, which had been repaired and altered, and repaired again, and generally bashed about. It was a serviceman's nightmare.

"Someone's been through this with a garden rake," I said, closing the panels again. "The wonder is that it works at all. That crystal hook-up belongs on the bench. It has possibilities; but it doesn't belong in a computer. What's the production line like?"

Bailey compressed his lips ; but didn't answer. He banged a switch over, and the line began to roll. I watched the tell-tale on the feed vats. Everything all right there. I followed the line down until the pills appeared, and ran into the packing head. The plastic tubes came out on the other side, each with five, large pills in it. Only they weren't the same pills that had gone into the packing head. I opened a tube, and let the pills run into my hand. They were golden in colour, and they should have been white.

That's when I should have walked out on the job. It would have saved a lot of trouble later on. Instead, I stood looking at the pills and trying to work it out with that crazy hook-up in mind ; but the stuff didn't come from the feed vats. If it did then it underwent a metamorphosis in the packing head, and that was impossible.

"Wonderful !" I said. "White in, yellow out. Old Belov certainly picks the crumbiest jobs !"

"If you split one," said Bailey, "you'll find that it's the same all the way through. It should show twenty-three layers, coloured white, yellow, red, yellow, in that order all the way to the core, which should be red. These aren't the same pills."

I dropped them on a bench. "How did it begin ?" I asked him.

He nodded towards Meerschraft, who looked intently at the floor. "This clown repaired it for me after a breakdown three days ago. When he switched on this is what happened. My product just doesn't come out of the line. Something else comes out instead. Impossible, of course ; but that's what happens."

"Have you had the packing head off?"

"No," said Meerschraft, sulkily. "Have a look for yourself. You'll see why. The release clamps are rusted solid."

I had a look. He was right. They *were* rusted solid. "Never mind," I said, searching around. "That's easily rectified. A little force applied in the right place, my friends, can work wonders."

I took a hammer from a bench nearby, and gave the clamps a good pounding. They fell away, taking part of the casting along with them.

Bailey put his hands to his head and screamed like an injured pig. "Why did you have to bring this lunatic along?" he asked Meerschraft.

My colleague just shook his head, dumbly, and gazed at the wreckage.

"I was the only lunatic around," I said. The pills were bouncing all over the place now that the packing head had lifted clear of the line. I took a hasty step backwards, treading on one of Bailey's big feet. He drew his breath in sharply, and swore. I dodged behind him. "It's your job," I said to Meerschraft. "I'm only the sub-contractor."

"What the devil's happening?" gasped Bailey.

Meerschraft must have seen it then. He tried to get behind me, but without success.

It was, to say the least of it, somewhat disconcerting. The belt came to an abrupt end as though it had been cut. There was a gap of maybe six inches, and then the belt appeared again. The belt was still travelling; but the gap remained stationary. The gap itself was intensely black, and flecked with a myriad tiny specks of light like a section of space seen through the wrong end of a telescope.

The pills were carried in a steady stream to the edge of the gap, and then disappeared. On the other side appeared the strange, golden pills. I switched off. When I looked again the gap had vanished, and the belt was quite normal.

"Start it up again," ordered Bailey, tensely. "See if that gap in the belt is still there."

I noticed he was standing about a dozen yards away.

"You start it up," I said. "I'm going home." I stuck my hat on, and made for the door.

Meerschraft grabbed me by the coat. "What about the ten pounds?" he asked. "You're in this as deep as I am, Belov," he added, desperately. "You've got to help me sort it out."

I removed my hat with a sigh, and chucked it on the bench. "Okay," I agreed ; " but I'm doing this for friendship, not for the money."

I'd rather make friends with a rattlesnake ! However, politeness costs nothing, and there was still the rest of that fee to collect, if I were successful in closing the mysterious gap. It's origin was another matter, and not my province at all. I just didn't want to know. Someone, or something was playing games ; but they had all the aces. I don't play on those terms.

They were waiting, at a discreet distance, for me to switch the line on again, the cowards ! One thing old Belov has, and that is courage. I spotted a length of tubing standing against the wall. It was about nine feet long. Regardless of the danger, I took this and walked towards the switch board. Then I stopped. After all, I had my duty towards the community to consider. To place a unique brain like mine at hazard was practically a criminal act.

I thrust the tubing into Meerschraft's trembling paws. " Here," I directed, " use this to switch on if you are too jelly-bellied to go any nearer." Then I drew back.

Meerschraft switch on, and stepped back. The gap appeared immediately, and the pills did their transformation act. With no packing head in operation the golden pills were flying all over the place.

Bailey picked up the tubing and switched off the vats. The gap remained ; but when the white pills stopped sliding over the edge of it, the golden pills didn't come out.

" Have either of you two cybernetic numbskulls any explanation ?" inquired the chemist, pleasantly.

One can stand so much. I walked towards him. " You poisonous, egotistical, money-grabbing throw-back !" I said. " How would you like my foot in your face ?"

He picked up a heavy spanner from the bench. " Just you try it !" he snarled.

Meerschraft came between us. " Gentlemen !" he pleaded. " Don't let us quarrel. We don't know what this thing is yet. It may be dangerous. Something could be watching us through that slot, or gap, or space-warp, or whatever it is . . ."

We turned as one man, and gazed at it, uneasily. Then, in a flash of inspiration, I dug into my pocket, and found a penny. I tossed this onto the belt, and watched it move along to the gap, where it disappeared.

"Look !" exclaimed Meerschraft, pointing.

A coin had appeared on the other side of the gap ; but it didn't look like a penny. It was bright, and gleaming, like a gold piece. I picked up the tubing, and switched the line off. When I turned round again I found Bailey examining the coin, and snatched it from him. After all, it had been my penny.

It was certainly heavy enough for gold, and pretty badly worn. I was able to mark it with my finger nail quite easily. There was just the suggestion of a head on both obverse and reverse sides ; but that was all.

"Could it be gold ?" asked Meerschraft, eagerly.

"It's gold all right," said Bailey, in a tight voice.

They gazed at the coin, avariciously.

I put it in my pocket. "I think I know what the set-up is," I told them, rubbing my hands together, briskly. I was delighted, I can tell you. "Barter, my friends. Plain, old-fashioned barter. I don't know who or what is on the other end ; but if this is a gold coin it looks like good business to me. Talk about beads and bits of looking glass ! The Merchant Adventurers never had it as good. We're dealing with a tribe of scientific savages. Switch on, Meerschraft, old friend. We've got some sharp trading to do."

"Not so fast," objected Bailey. "This happens to be my trading post." He pulled a handful of coins from his pocket. "All right," he said, tensely. "You can switch on now."

Cupidity took him right up to the production line, where he laid his coins out in a long row. Meerschraft switched on, and the coins slid into the gap. Out from the other side, coin for coin, came the gold pieces, a very varied assortment indeed. They weren't a bit alien ; but they were old. How old I couldn't say. Some of them had Latin inscriptions.

I shoved my loose change on, and collected while Bailey was still examining his quick profits. Meerschraft followed suit, with disgusting eagerness. Then a plastic beaker, standing on the bench, caught my eye. I stuck it on the production belt. It ran into the gap, and disappeared.

"What the . . ." began Bailey, and then : "Ah !"

A heavily-chased golden goblet, studded with what appeared to be precious stones, flashing refrigerated fire that crackled in our greedy brains, slid out on the other side of the gap. Bailey fought us off as we grabbed for it.

"Mine!" he screamed, holding it to his chest. "Mine! It was my beaker, wasn't it?"

We left him with it, and started piling things on the belt. The great gold-rush was on. We snarled at each other, and battled for what came off the other end. Instruments, tools, and every spare piece of equipment went on the belt. Forgotten for the moment was the question of ownership. Out of the gap came a strange and varied assortment of odds and ends that were possibly instruments and equipment used by the other-worlders. We grabbed the things off the belt, and tore them from each other, piling them on our own little heap of glittering wealth. No human sounds came from us. We grunted and gasped, and snarled like animals. We had gold fever. It was only afterwards that I began to wonder why every article should be made of gold, or appear to be.

When everything that wasn't bolted down, and a lot that was, had gone into the gap, Bailey produced a fistful of notes. "Here," he said to Meerschraft. "Get me a thousand plastic beakers, and a few pounds-worth of coppers." Then he frowned, and put the notes back in his pocket again before Meerschraft could answer. "I changed my mind," he said. "You might alert the whole neighbourhood. I don't want people beating down my door to convert their junk into wealth. That's the only reason why I am allowing you two to stay," he added.

He carried his loot bit by bit over to an empty spares cupboard, and locked it up. Then he went out, and locked the door after him.

"We've pretty well stripped the place," observed Meerschraft, looking round.

All that was left on the bench was an apple. Someone had bitten a piece out of it and, in any case, it wasn't a very good apple. In fact, it was wrinkled and mouldy. I placed it on the belt, and we watched eagerly, jostling for a good position at the receiving end.

I don't know what we expected in return. Something fabulous, I think. What we received was something about the size and shape of a medium-sized melon. It shot out of the gap, and over my shoulder, taking poor Meerschraft full in the face. This time the object wasn't golden. It was blue outside, and a kind of dirty grey inside. It burst about Meerschraft's

head with a soft, wet, glutinous sound, and it smelt like an over-ripe cheese, only worse.

"Eek!" he exclaimed, and clawed frantically at the awful stuff, which clung like thick porridge.

"That's funny," I said, meaning funny peculiar, and then something even more peculiar happened, and it wasn't a bit funny.

There was a faint *ping*! and the gap in the production belt had gone. A lot of other things had gone, too. All the golden doodahs, which we had received in exchange for upwards of a thousand-pounds-worth of instruments, tools, spares, and other equipment, had vanished. Even the golden coin that I had slipped into my pocket had gone, and the plastic tubes, which had contained those gleaming, golden pills, were all empty.

"Meerschraft, old friend," I said, sadly, "we've been had."

He used his handkerchief to wipe the rest of that horrible fruit—or whatever it was—from his face, and looked to where he had piled his heap of treasure. Then he gasped, and pulled me aside to look for mine.

"What happened?" he asked, in a dazed voice.

"It looks as though we've been the victims of an interplanetary, or interdimensional, confidence trick," I told him. "We've been had by a gang of super-spivs. I think I know now why everything was gold, or appeared to be. They wanted us to accept their odds and ends, and no questions asked. No experts poking their noses in. Gold was the answer. There's something about the sight of gold that brings out the worst in men, and turns them into acquisitive automatons. How did they know about this weakness of ours? Perhaps they know more about us than we know ourselves; or perhaps it is a general failing right throughout the universe."

"That damned thing that hit me wasn't golden!" Meerschraft said, bitterly.

"No," I agreed; "but they'd finished with us then. Everything else has gone, but that stinking mess is still with us. What's the betting that all the other gew-gaws were illusory, just the manifestation of our own greed?"

"The robbing devils!" said Meerschraft; but without any rancour. After all, he had lost nothing. The loser was probably even now belting back to base with a thousand plastic beakers, and about a half-hundred-weight of copper.

He had yet to learn that there had been a serious drop in the exchange value of these items. Meerschraft frowned. "I wonder how they managed it?" he mused.

The answer hit me right away; but putting it into communicable terms was another matter. "My friend," I said, "I'll do my best to explain it to you; but don't be surprised if your brain boggles. It is given to few minds to comprehend the ultimate without quailing."

He sighed, and shook his head.

"The universe," I went on, "can be regarded as an infinite capacitor, with Time as the dielectric separating the living plates from each other. To-day, and to-morrow, and yesterday are no further than a thought away, and distance is an illusion. Given the necessary e.m.f. we can burst through the dielectric of distance. Spacetime will then be at our personal disposal."

He grinned at me. "And how would you apply this e.m.f.?" he asked.

"You don't apply it, you fat oaf, you project it! Do I have to lend you my brains? Perhaps you'd like to patent it? Is that what you are after, you sneaking hound? All right, then, I'll tell you. Through a Smith-Robel projection tube fed by a square-law Tesler. There are certain associated circuits; but I wouldn't draught those for a pension. Life is complicated enough as it is without rubbing shoulders with anachronisms and aliens."

That held him.

He shook his head and laughed. "You are either a liar or a genius, Belov," he told me.

"A little of both," I admitted, modestly. "A genius, my friend, is a person who conceives an interesting lie, and then makes it stick by converting it into a concrete fact. Like television, and the aeroplane. Like the wheel."

At this point the door was thrown open, and Bailey struggled in with a huge, cardboard box, and a plastic bag filled with copper coins. He dropped the lot on the floor, and a couple of pennies bounced out, and rolled towards me. I picked them up. One has to be thankful for small mercies.

Bailey rubbed his hands together, briskly. "Now for a killing," he said, happily. "I'm a reasonable man. You can have one each in every ten items, and no more squabbling. This has to be an orderly operation." He tore the top off the

box, and pulled some white, plastic beakers out. "Pile these on," he instructed. "I'll take the receiving end."

"I'll take the air," I said. "I don't feel too well."

I moved towards the door.

"Wait!" yelled Bailey. He had just discovered that the production belt was back to normal again. "What happened to that gap?" he demanded.

"Their Chancellor managed to bridge it," I informed him; "but he had to call in every convertible asset."

He rushed over to the spares cupboard, and opened it. It was empty. He must have felt like Mother Hubbard's dog. Then he did a surprising thing. He dashed past us into the office. When he returned he was brandishing a nasty-looking automatic.

"All right," he said, "where are they? If you don't hand them over I'm going to call the police."

"What are you going to tell them?" I asked him. "That we stole a golden goblet, and a lot of other fancy things, which you bartered for a plastic beaker, a load of scrap, and a few coins? That the people you traded with live about three-billion light years away, or perhaps further, and that the trading was done through a kind of dimensional gap in your pill production belt; a gap which is no longer there?"

"So they won't believe me?" he jabbed the pistol into my stomach. "Well, maybe I don't need them. What happened to all that gold?"

"My friend," I assured him, quickly, "old Belov wouldn't rob you. Meerschraft might." I nodded towards that trembling heap of jelly, and in his agitation Bailey turned from me and pushed the gun into Meerschraft's midriff. "Hand it over," snarled the manufacturer, "or I'll blow an inspection hole in your guts!"

Poor Meerschraft squealed in terror, and collapsed in a heap on the floor.

"You've shot him," I said. "Look at the blood!"

"What blood," said Bailey, stepping back. He was disconcerted. "I didn't even pull the trigger."

His eyes flickered uneasily towards Meerschraft. I moved forward, quickly, and snatched the gun from him.

"Now," I said, showing him the business end, "perhaps we can discuss this thing in a more civilised fashion. First of all, I want you to look in your pockets for those gold coins."

"You want the coins as well," he breathed. "All right, you damned crook!" He dug into his pockets, and then pulled them inside out. "They've gone," he said, in amazement. "You must have taken them. You picked my pockets."

"Look," I said, making one last, desperate attempt to convince him of the truth. "All that stuff, including the coins, just vanished. It may never have been there in the first place. It was probably just a figment of the imagination."

"You won't get away with it," he promised.

I gave up, and kicked Meerschraft in the ribs. He sat up, and shook his big, fat head. "Where am I?" he asked, in bewilderment. Then he caught sight of Bailey, and his memory must have returned in a flood. "I didn't do it," he said. "It was Belov. He traded in a rotten apple, and they didn't like it."

I put the gun on the desk. "I'll send you the bill later, Mr. Bailey," I said.

He made a grab for the gun, and I left rather rapidly. I took the grav-lift to First Level, and jumped the North ped-strip.

3

Towards evening I wandered into Emilio's for a bite of supper. A newcast was in progress on the video. I sat at a table nearby, and gazed idly at the screen while I waited for Emilio or Rosie to take my order.

There was a whole lot of guff about various Government projects, including 'Operation Deep Acre,' an attempt to 'farm' the seas on a strictly scientific basis. This would have been all right if the scientists hadn't made the seas into radioactive dumps. Now the fish had to be de-activated before consumption, which increased the price, and destroyed the flavour. Emilio never served fish these days. It had begun to taste like blotting paper soaked in olive oil.

Then the announcer got on to world news, and the first item made me sit up sharp.

". . . A number of valuable, gold coins, some dating back to before the Middle Ages, were missing for nearly an hour this afternoon. They are normally kept in a special, locked room in the Museum of Antiquities, New York. According to Professor J. Cadmun, a whole host of other items disappeared at about the same time, some of them priceless relics from the tombs of the Emperors of old Cathay. All these items were of gold.

"Professor Cadmun said he saw them disappear one by one. Eventually, having assured himself that it was no hallucination, he informed some other members of his staff, and the police were called ; but when they entered the room everything was found to be normal. A careful check revealed that nothing was missing. Professor Cadmun is now in a nursing home, and is being treated for a severe nervous breakdown."

Only three people were likely to believe his story, and they weren't in New York. I wondered where the computer, or whatever was responsible for this remarkable bit of ESP, had dumped the pills and all the other gear. And where the devil that horrible fruit, if it was fruit, had come from. The golden pills worried me a bit, too.

Emilio came over himself. He didn't seem too pleased. I was uneasily aware that he had a cleaver in his hand.

"Belov," he frowned, "how many times I have to tell you, huh? This is not your private office." He pointed the cleaver at me. "Five calls I had this afternoon for you. Four people wanted money—their money. The other was from Dobbs Drugs. I want you should not publish my video number as yours. That is all. Otherwise I chop your head off, and separate your mouth from your stomach."

"Delightful," I grinned. "What did Dobbs want?"

"Something funny happen to their production line. They make those pills that knock twenty years off your middle age."

"And thirty years off your life," I said, remembering where I'd seen those golden pills. "Dobbs Golden Revitalisers. The undertaker's best friend!"

"They are knee deep in some other pills which they don't make."

"That figures," I said. "I'll have devilled lamb kidneys, followed by a small bombe Jubilee, with glace cherries, drenched in kirsch. Whole, boiled potatoes with the kidneys, and a little, white bread."

"You have the money?"

I nodded.

"Rosie!" he bellowed. "A slice of York ham for Mr. Belov, and a hot, buttered scone."

The dog!

"What about this job?" he asked.

"There is no job," I said. "Just a computer with an Eden complex. Apples infuriate the thing. Anyone who tries to straighten that out will wind up with Professor Cadmun in a nursing home, supposing he can afford it."

"Who is . . ." began Emilio, and then shook his head as though to clear it. He leant towards me. "Belov," he said, "when I listen to you I think maybe I waste my time learning English."

"My friend," I told him, "it is a waste of time learning anything. It only gets you into trouble."

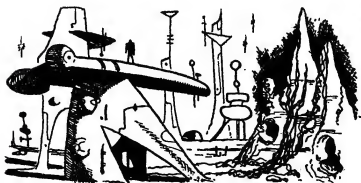
I'd spotted Bailey in the doorway. He had a policeman with him. They appeared to be looking for someone, and I didn't need three guesses.

Bailey pointed, dramatically. "There he is !" he shouted. "There's the miscreant !"

I wondered what he had managed to cook up ; but I didn't wait to argue. I never seem to have much luck arguing with policemen. Instead, I belted across the restaurant, and out through the kitchen, grabbing a handful of cold, pork sausages on the way.

One has to live.

—Edward Mackin



STUDIES IN SCIENCE FICTION

Abraham Merritt has justly been called the "Lord Of Fantasy" and Sam Moskowitz recounts here in this sixth article of his series the events which led up to the designation. (Readers should not mistake the "Argosy" magazine mentioned for the presentday British magazine of the same title).

6. The Marvellous A. Merritt

By Sam Moskowitz

The weekly adventure fiction magazine *Argosy*, fifty-eight years old in 1938, conducted a poll of its readers to determine the most popular story published in the history of the magazine. That story was to be reprinted. *Argosy* was then the most prominent adventure story magazine in the history of the Western World. At one time it had achieved a greater circulation than any other magazine in America, regardless of type !

The votes pouring in honoured a fabulous group of storytellers : Edgar Rice Burroughs, creator of the imagination-stirring *Tarzan* ; Albert Payson Terhune, gifted writer of dog stories ; Frank L. Packard, renowned for *The Miracle Man* and his Jimmy Dale series ; John Buchan, whose *Thirty-Nine Steps* is a cloak-and-dagger show-piece ; James Branch Cabell, author of perhaps the most widely discussed novel of the

twenties, *Jurgen* ; Howard R. Garis, beloved chronicler of the children's animal favourite, Uncle Wiggily ; Johnston McCulley, whose flashing tales of *Zorro* still thrill on TV's magic mirror ; Erle Stanley Gardner, perennially best-selling detective novelist ; Gaston Leroux, universally known through the motion picture versions of *Phantom of the Opera* ; Max Brand, one of the truly great writers of the old west and Ludwig Lewisohn, whose fiction will probably endure as literature, to name only a few of the many outstanding authors who made it possible for *Argosy* in 1938 to "point with pride" to a record of more than seven hundred hardcover books reprinted from its pages !

The winner was *The Ship of Ishtar* by A. Merritt and the reprinting of that story in six weekly instalments commenced with the October 29, 1938 issue of *Argosy*. The ranks of adventure writers, the legions of pulp magazine followers and, more particularly, the editorial vote-counters were astounded. But to Albert J. Gibney, associate publisher of The Frank A. Munsey Company this evidence of popularity seemed to confirm and justify a top-level *Argosy* decision made many years before.

"We paid A. Merritt the highest word-rate given anyone in the history of the magazine," he revealed, in a fascinatingly candid appraisal. "This only proves he was worth it !"

A. Merritt loved the craft of writing. It is doubtful if he wrote a single line of fiction with monetary considerations in mind. For twenty-five years he had been right-hand man to Morrill Goddard, editor of *The American Weekly*, a magazine supplement distributed with the Hearst newspapers with a weekly circulation of five million copies. Morrill Goddard earned \$240,000 a year in that capacity.

It seems reasonable to suppose that as second man in the organization, Merritt also received rather exceptional remuneration. That such was the case was evidenced by a second home in Indian Rock Key, Pinellas County, Florida ; a 75-acre experimental farm in Brandenton, Florida, where he raised avocados, mangoes and litchi, and an experimental farm near Clearwater, where he planted the first olive groves in Florida. He also maintained a hot house of rare poisonous plants. In 1937 Morrill Goddard died and Merritt became the editor of *The American Weekly*.

Recognition similar to *Argosy's* had been given Merritt by his most devoted followers, the science fiction readers,

a few years earlier. *Wonder Stories*, under the aegis of Hugo Gernsback, conducted a survey of its readers aimed at determining the favourite science fiction of their entire reading experience. *The Moon Pool* by A. Merritt headed the list, even though the story had been published in magazine form almost a decade previously and no stories by Merritt had ever appeared in *Wonder Stories* !

The first sampling the science fiction readers had of A. Merritt was his 6,000-word short-story *Through the Dragon Glass*, which appeared in the November 24, 1917 issue of *All-Story*. Merritt's initial effort might have attracted little attention, if the cover of that issue had not illustrated a new four-part interplanetary novel, *The Cosmic Courtship*, by Julian Hawthorne, son of the great American author, Nathaniel Hawthorne.

Lured by the promise of Hawthorne's cosmic romance, science fiction readers found themselves considerably more enthralled by Merritt's brief fantasy of Herndon, who raided the Imperial Palace of Peking during the Boxer rebellion and came away with a green stone on which was carved twelve dragons with emerald eyes.

Herndon passes through this stone into another world, where seven artificial moons revolve perpetually around a mist-shrouded valley walled with fire. There he meets the maiden Santhu and is attacked by a winged beast, whose master hunts him as a quarry in a cruel and ingenious game. Badly clawed, he escapes from the Dragon Glass, to pass through a second time with an elephant gun. He never returns.

The next tale from Merritt's typewriter was bona fide science fiction. The January 5, 1918 issue of *All-Story* carried *The People of the Pit*. This story of an Alaskan explorer who discovers a stairway leading down into a volcanic crater, at the bottom of which exists a strange city inhabited by tentacled, transparent, snail-like monstrosities, who float in the air and exert a powerful psychological influence upon him, is a polished masterpiece. It is trite and sometimes condescending to state that an author's work is worthy of Edgar Allan Poe, but had Poe written *The People of the Pit*, it would today be held up as one of the brightest jewels in the diadem of literary masterpieces which crown his genius.

Fame was not to come to Merritt the hard way. He would not have to build a tremendous literary pyramid composed of

rhetoical blocks and mortared with imaginative inspiration, to show above his contemporaries. One more novelette, *The Moon Pool*, published in *All-Story* for June 22, 1919, and letters by the hundreds began to pour across the desk of Robert H. Davis, the famous Munsey editor who had discovered Merritt.

The master touch in the handling of the highly individualistic prose that had been so conspicuously evident in *The People of the Pit* was repeated in *The Moon Pool*. The imaginative concept of a pool of force created by the vibrational pattern of seven different lights, which provided the transfer mechanism from the surface to some strange realm below and "The Shining One," an alien entity of radiant matter which acted as a guide between worlds, fired the imagination, arousing a clamour for a sequel which could not be ignored.

Bob Davis, who had felt that fifty dollars a story had been generous pay for Merritt's shorter lengths, dangled forth forty times that sum if he would write a full-length sequel.

With the publication of only two short stories and a novelette Merritt had become the "hottest" writer in science fiction since Edgar Rice Burroughs. Though there was a divergence in styles, there was also a pronounced affinity between Burroughs and Merritt.

Merritt represented the furthest extreme that the scientific romance—ushered into phenomenal popularity when Edgar Rice Burroughs' *Under the Moons of Mars* delighted the *All-Story* readership of 1912—was to go. Much of Merritt was then and would continue to be, sheer fantasy. Stories which because of their scientific aspects—never obtrusively introduced—qualified as science fiction, were in mood and spirit fantasy.

Like Burroughs, Merritt's intent was solely to entertain. Yet no single author of his period was to exert greater influence upon his contemporaries and upon the science fiction writers still in embryo.

Son of quaker parents, Abraham Merritt was born January 20, 1884, in Beverley, N.J., a small community near Philadelphia. Merritt, in his youth, had a predilection for the Law. He attended lectures at the University of Pennsylvania but was mostly self-educated. Poor family finances compelled him to abandon law and at the age of nineteen he obtained a reporting job with the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. That first job was the turning point of his life.

As a cub reporter he was an eyewitness to an event—the nature of which he assiduously kept secret—which was to have serious political implications. To avoid repercussions and to prevent young Abe Merritt from “spilling the beans,” he was prevailed upon by parties unknown to leave the country, with all of his expenses paid.

The following year, spent in Mexico and Central America, played a strong development role in Merritt's thinking. As a youth he had been profoundly influenced by the novelist S. Weir Mitchell, who had encouraged free inquiry into folklore and strange phenomena. Dr. Charles Eucharist de Medicis Sajous, renowned for his pioneer studies into the functions of the ductless glands, taught him a respect for science and the scientific method. Both of these intellectual fevers he fed at the “sacred well” of Chichen Itza; exploring the Mayan city of Tulum; treasure hunting in Yucatan and undergoing rites by which he became the blood-brother of an Indian tribe in Miraflores.

When the heat lifted, he returned to the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and eventually rose to the position of night city editor. Veteran companion journalists, James J. O'Neill and Colonel George Kennedy remembered him as a “superlative” newspaperman whose flair for vividly covering executions, murders, suicides, hangings and at least one “personally conducted lynching,” was unsurpassed.

Inordinately sensitive, Merritt drank himself into restfulness after each of these sessions. This wholesale contact with the more gruesome and soul-sickening aspects of life were later compensated for by escape into fantasy.

His work as Philadelphia correspondent for Morrill Goddard, editor of *The Sunday Supplement* of the Hearst newspapers, resulted in an offer which brought him to New York in 1912 and a life-time career on the publication which was to evolve into *The American Weekly*.

Always a six-day-a-week job during Goddard's reign, life on *The American Weekly*, while well paid, permitted a young writer little time for side ventures. Yet, encouraged by the adulation he plunged into the writing of his first novel-length story, a sequel to *The Moon Pool*, entitled *The Conquest of the Moon Pool*. The reaction that followed the completion of the sequel, published in six weekly instalments beginning in the February 15, 1919 *All-Story*, verged on hysteria.

Speaking of his personal feelings, Edmond Hamilton, veteran science fiction author, echoed the fascination of thousands when he said : " I had a newspaper route about that time and when Merritt's long-awaited sequel to *The Moon Pool* came out, I carried papers one night each week with the *All-Story Magazine* held three inches before my eyes, avoiding automobiles and street-cars by the grace of God, and heaving every paper on the wrong porch."

Re-read from the vantage point of the somewhat more sophisticated modern reader, *The Conquest of the Moon Pool* reveals glaring flaws. In contrast to *The Moon Pool* there are sequences that show obvious signs of haste. The movement of events follows the standard pattern of earlier period, thrillers. The characters are stereotypes : Larry O'Keefe, the Irishman ; Olaf, the Scandinavian and Von Hertzdorf, the treacherous German (who, in a later edition and in a different political climate, is converted to Marakinoff, the Russian devil) ; Lakla, the hand-maiden (personification of good), and Yolara, dark priestess of evil.

Along with them are such stock chillers as frog men, dwarf men, and dead-alive men and the love scenes make no concession to a world already climbing out of Victorian prudery.

Yet the novel holds a unique magic for readers. It is an honest story. It evokes more than a hint of the strangest mysteries and the imagination of the author never falters in his brilliant preoccupation with the unearthly, the terrifying and the bizarre.

It also promises rich, colourful, heroic action in the tradition of the *Odyssey* and it keeps that promise. The age-old struggle between good and evil with the cleavage sharply differentiated, forms the basis of the plot. In this contest, the reader is thrilled by flights of imaginative fantasy reminiscent of the best of H. Rider Haggard.

Greatest victory of all, Merritt transcended the coldness and dehumanization that frequently accompanies pure fantasy. His word pictures form a mood.

Humanity shines from this work. For every stock character there is a brilliantly original one of his own creating. The Shining One, a robot of pure force with fantastic powers, becomes believable as its intelligence acquires human-like drives of personal pride, and desire for achievement and power.

The Silent Ones, ageless, godlike men from an ancient civilization which created The Shining One—now aloof and inscrutable—call upon ancient science to thwart the ambitions of this strange thinking force and its dreadful omniscience. When they have destroyed their creation: "No flames now in their ebon eyes—for the flickering fires were quenched in great tears, streaming down the marble white faces."

Basic patterns for other Merritt novels were established in *The Moon Pool*. Future stories would always be built on the conflict of light against darkness. There would always be a beautiful priestess of evil, and the villains would be memorably, brilliantly characterized. Forms which are generally symbols of repulsion, the frog men in *The Moon Pool*; the spider men and the snake women in *The Snake Mother*; Ricori, the gangster in *Burn, Witch, Burn*, are converted by literary sorcery into sympathetic and admirable characters.

One of the most impressive aspects of Merritt's success was the period in which it was achieved. Within the space of not much more than a year, the era of the scientific romance had blossomed to its fullest flower. Competing with Merritt for the public's attention, often in the same publications, were a glittering assemblage of fantasy classics by masters of the art. J. U. Giesy had broken new ground only eight months previously with the first of his occult-interplanetary trilogy, *Palos, of the Dog Star Pack*. Praise for Victor Rousseau's surgical fantasy, *Draft of Eternity*, still echoed in the readers' departments. *Citadel of Fear* was the work of Francis Stevens, a woman whose stories displayed such beauty of style and narrative skill that for years it was thought that Merritt had written them under a pen name. *Who Wants a Green Bottle?*, a brilliant effort by the greatly underrated Tod Robbins, had appeared only three months before.

A young man who—forty years later—would earn the title of "The Dean of Science Fiction Writers," Murray Leinster, had an early story, *The Runaway Skyscraper* in that year's *Argosy*. Max Brand was also making memorable contributions to fantasy with *Devil Ritter*, *John Ovington Returns* and the grisly *That Receding Brow*, which ran in the very same issue as the first instalment of *The Conquest of the Moon Pool*.

While Merritt's novel was still being serialized, Ray Cummings' *The Girl in the Golden Atom* appeared and a clamour for a sequel, only slightly less intense than that which

greeted Merritt's *Moon Pool* arose. *The Planeteer*, *The Lord of Death* and *The Queen of Life*, the threesome that established Homer Eon Flint's reputation were soon to follow.

Scarcely was Merritt's novel concluded, than Austin Hall's imaginative triumph, *Into the Infinite*, was begun. Before the year's end the brilliant scientific romancer, George Allan England was to thrill a wide audience with *The Flying Legion*.

Blue Book had a short time previously published what many believe to be Edgar Rice Burrough's best story, *The People That Time Forgot*, sequel to *The Land That Time Forgot*. In the same magazine, a brilliant but little-known Britisher, William Hope Hodgson, increase his reader following with *The Terrible Derelict*.

Argosy had old-hand Garrett Smith taking bows for *After a Million Years*. On every side, competing for attention were such renowned story tellers as Sax Rohmer, Edison Marshall, Philip M. Fisher, Charles B. Stilson and Loring Brent.

That Merritt was singled out and accorded unique prestige amidst such a brilliant galaxy of performers, reveals how completely he captivated the imagination of the readers, and explains why no one has contested the title conferred on him—*A. Merritt : Lord of Fantasy*.

Using the battlefields of France as a locale, Merritt next wrote a short story entitled *Three Lines of Old French*, which appeared in the August 9, 1919 issue of *All Story*. The style was an abrupt departure from that of his just-published novel. It was restrained, almost journalistic in tone, but still had about it much of the same hauntingly imaginative quality which had characterized *The People of the Pit* and *The Moon Pool*.

It deals with a surgeon in France who decides to conduct a psychological experiment on a soldier almost paralyzed with battle fatigue and half-hypnotized by strain. The medical man presses a piece of paper in the soldier's hand with a line from a French ballad. *And there she waits to greet him when all his days are done*. Then he passes a sprig of flowers before the man's eyes.

The soldier's subconscious mind accepts these symbols and he is plunged into a fantasy world in which he is carried into the past, to the garden of beautiful Lucie de Tocquelain. He falls in love with her, but rejoicing in the knowledge that there is another life, he wills to return so that he can tell his comrades

that death is an illusion. Before he leaves, the French lass scribbles three lines on a piece of paper and thrusts it into his pocket.

Emerging from his trance, the soldier is crushed by the realization that it was all an experiment—until he finds the crumpled slip of paper and reads the girl's brief and moving message.

*Nor grieve, dear heart, nor fear the seeming—
Here is waking after dreaming.
She who loves you,*

Lucie.

As a work of art, there is no question that *Three Lines of Old French* would not be out of place in an anthology of outstanding American short stories, even though elements of it show the influence of Robert W. Chambers' charming fantasy, *The Demoiselle D'Ys*. A stranger tribute was to be Merritt's reward, however; one similar to that experienced by Arthur Machen when his short story, *The Bowmen*, appeared in the *London Evening News* for September 29, 1914. Letters began to pour in, particularly from England, praising Merritt and thanking him. Bereaved parents, grasping for a spark of reason in the tragic loss of a loved one in battle had taken hope from Merritt's intimation of a life after death.

The Moon Pool and *The Conquest of the Moon Pool* were combined under the title of the original novelette and issued in hard covers by Putnam in 1919. The book sold well and Liveright later took over the reprint rights. "*The Moon Pool*" has been constantly in print for forty years, selling steadily through prosperity, war and depression, despite three magazine reprintings and pocket book editions totalling several hundred thousand copies. Never a hard-cover best seller, it has nevertheless become an established classic of fantasy.

The most controversial work of Merritt's has always been *The Metal Monster*, published as an eight-part serial in *Argosy*—*All-Story*, beginning with the August 7, 1920 issue. Merritt said of the story: "I have never been satisfied with it. It has some of the best writing in it that I ever did and some of the worst. It has always been a problem child."

The novel is in a sense, a sequel to *The Conquest of the Moon Pool*, since one of the lead characters and narrator Dr. Walter T. Goodwin appears again, and references are made to

incidents in the previous stories. Sensitive to the slightest criticism, Merritt lost confidence in this work when reader reaction proved mixed.

Merritt let out all the stops on *The Metal Monster*. That it is overwritten, Merritt himself was the first to acknowledge, but far from being a failure it is probably his most successful novel. Beginning with its opening passage: "*In this great crucible of life we call the world—in the vaster one we call the universe—the mysteries lie close packed, uncountable as grains of sand on ocean's shores. They thread gigantic the star-flung spaces; they creep, atomic, beneath the microscope's peering eye. They walk beside us, unseen and unheard, calling out to us, asking why we are deaf to their crying, blind to their wonder,*" the novel strikes a serious philosophical and later an intellectual note which interpenetrates the action.

Ray Bradbury in his short story, *Forever and the Earth*, tries to imagine how Thomas Wolfe would have described space and other worlds, had he put his mind to it or had the opportunity to visit them. Wolfe could hardly have improved on the inspired cosmic passages in which Merritt visualizes a world of metal intelligences hurtling through interstellar space, seeding uncounted worlds with offspring—one of them our earth!

The Metal Monster is the best unified of all Merritt's earlier novels and the tremendous descriptive passages delineating the fantastically alien concept of sentient, intelligent, metallic life succeeds admirably in poetically transmitting a mood of near-belief. A triumph for so difficult a theme.

Three years passed before Merritt completed another work. *The Face in the Abyss*, a 35,000-word short novel. Restraint was evident throughout the narrative, a restraint enlivened by a masterful technique and a bell-like clarity. There were invisible flying snakes, dinosaurs, spider-men and, most striking of all, a superb characterization of the Snake-Mother—part woman, part serpent. She was the last survivor of an ancient race, custodian of secrets and wisdom far in advance of human achievement. All this Merritt projected against the inspired backdrop of a tremendous carved image of an evil face, from which flowed tears of molten gold!

Readers who had reservations as to Merritt's entertainment index, and who had found his *tour de force*, "*The Metal Monster*," too much for them, were completely won over by

the spell of this new fantasy. With so much hinted at, and so very much left unsaid, *The Face in the Abyss*, which appeared in the September 8, 1923 issue of *Argosy—All-Story*, demanded a sequel.

But Merritt was no longer compelled or disposed to drive himself night and day to turn out inspired follow-ups for fickle audiences. His revenge was incomparable.

He made them wait six years for the sequel! He could hardly have been hard-pressed for time, because two other novels appeared during the interim, but he had apparently made up his mind to write only what he wanted, when he wanted.

Some months after the appearance of *The Face in the Abyss*, Bob Davis received a novelette from Merritt entitled *The Ship of Ishtar*. He returned it to the author, saying it was a shame to cramp so wondrous an idea by confining it to novelette length. Why not expand the basic concept to full novel length?

Merritt tried, but chafed under the task.

He wrote some of the last chapters first as independent episodes, then gradually filled in the gaps between. The novel showed it. The early portion, where the two ends of the ship are separated by a wall of force, is quite clearly a different sort of tale from the central section which hinges on action adventure or the final portion which is composed of a series of superbly wrought literary exercises. Yet superb craftsmanship is evident in every line and the singing rhythm of the prose carries one along with intense fascination to the very end, despite glaring inadequacies of plot and narrative construction.

This story is not science fiction, even by courtesy. It is sheer fantasy, but a truly remarkable fantasy with at least one chapter, "The King of Two Deaths," closer to genius than to talent.

The Ship of Ishtar began in *Argosy—All-Story* for November 8, 1924, and ran for six weekly instalments. The accolades that followed were sincere, as *Argosy's* poll fourteen years later confirmed. But now something new was happening in the science fiction world. Even as the period of the scientific romance blossomed and reached its height, another concept of science fiction was being revived. It challenged romance solely for entertainment's sake, and demanded that science

fiction incorporate the plausible logic of Edgar Allan Poe and the prophetic vision of Jules Verne to become an expression of man's thirst for knowledge and progress. It was headed by Hugo Gernback, who, as far back as 1911, in his popular scientific magazine, *Modern Electrics*, had written *Ralph 124C41 Plus*, a true miracle of plausible prophecy.

As his *Modern Electrics* metamorphised into *Electrical Experimenter* and finally into *Science and Invention*, he continued to promote science fiction of this type. Shortly after *The Ship of Ishtar* appeared, *Argosy—All-Story* was forced to take cognizance of the new trend by introducing Ralph Milne Farley with a great hullabaloo as to his scientific qualifications and the technical accuracy of his *The Radio Man*.

The instantaneous success of the first science fiction magazine, *Amazing Stories*, introduced in 1926 by Gernback, with the accent on more science, was the handwriting on the wall for the scientific romance. As high priest of the old order, A. Merritt stood to lose the most.

Then a remarkable thing happened. With the entire honour roll of the past to choose from in the field of reprints; with the necessity of selecting stories that most closely typified his ideas imperative, Hugo Gernback made a startling exception. That exception was A. Merritt. He elected to reprint every science fiction story Merritt had written up to that time—the book version of *The Moon Pool*, *The Face in the Abyss*, *The People of the Pit* (twice, once in the monthly and once in *Amazing Stories Annual*). Most astonishing of all, he had Merritt revise *The Metal Monster* and ran it as *The Metal Emperor* in *Science and Invention* in twelve monthly instalments.

The reading public's response was electric. It was as if Merritt had been discovered for the first time. Readers referred to him as a "genius." Manuscripts from new writers distinctly betrayed his influence and such later well-known names as Jack Williamson and P. Schuyler Miller openly acknowledged their literary debt to him.

The old order would die, and with it most of the "Elder Gods." But Merritt would reign on!

To conquer the specialized new world of the science fiction magazines, Merritt had fired a fusilade; the realm of weird-fantasy he toppled with a single shot.

It happened this way. A novelette whose theme symbolized the ages of struggle between man and the forest, *The Woman*

of the Wood, was submitted by Merritt to *Argosy—All-Story*. In one of his rare errors of judgment, Bob Davis rejected it as being "plotless." On condition that not a single word be altered, A. Merritt offered it to *Weird Tales*, where it was published in the August, 1926 number. Merritt did have to prove himself again. Years later, Farnsworth Wright admitted that this hauntingly atmospheric tale of the birch forest which assumed human shape to save itself from destruction, was the most popular novelette which *Weird Tales* had ever published.

Bent on campaigns of literary imperialism, Merritt next invaded the mystery field with *Seven Footprints to Satan*, a five-part novel beginning in *Argosy—All-Story* for July 2, 1927. Loyal science fiction and fantasy fans were disappointed, but the mystery fans were delighted. Built around the sinister figure of a man who calls himself Satan, the novel deals with the activities of a cult formed to play a deadly game where the stakes are fortune or death. Replete with dozens of unique melodramatic devices and a full retinue of stock ones, the novel was a set-up for Hollywood and First National had it in movie houses even before the appearance of the Boni and Liveright hard cover edition in February, 1928. Within a month the book had gone through three editions and into a low-price Grossett & Dunlap reprint, illustrated with stills from the motion picture.

This was heady brew for A. Merritt. Only one year earlier, Putnam had been unable to sell a pitifully small edition of a thousand copies of *The Ship of Ishtar* in book form and the sheets for the last 300 copies were finally purchased by Munsey, bound and distributed to readers of *Argosy—All-Story Magazine*.

For the next three years Merritt rested on his laurels, toying with a new novel he had picked up and put down without completing since 1923—*The Fox Woman*. Unable to develop the plot properly he put it aside with only about 15,000 words completed—he never did complete it—and started work on a sequel to *The Face in the Abyss*.

Seven years had passed since that story had first appeared in *Argosy—All-Story*. With *The Snake Mother* he returned to the fold. The title character is the best rounded, most sympathetic and memorable one he ever created, though in this novel, which ran to seven instalments beginning in the October 25, 1930 *Argosy*, he fashioned a villain with truly captivating appeal—Nimer! Nimer is a disembodied intelli-

gence—evil incarnate—who is able to take over a human body as easily as changing to a new suit. The calibre of his strategy and his unquestionable courage, even against formidable odds makes him a figure of irresistible appeal.

A marvellous blend of action, superb characterization, philosophy, poetic prose, involving such elements as atomic powers and the strange Dream Makers (who could fabricate a hypnotic illusion like a story on a moving picture screen) *The Snake Mother* is an imaginative triumph.

If there has ever been any doubt that Merritt was escaping from the brutalities and injustices of the world in his novels and short-stories, it was dispelled by *The Dwellers in the Mirage*, which began in the January 23, 1932 number of *Argosy*. The yellow-haired Leif Langdon is unquestionably the youthful A. Merritt. Tsantawu, the Cherokee, Leif's guide, parallels the Indian who accompanied Merritt during his early sojourn in Mexico. The architecture and surrounding in the fictional land of the mirage is reminiscent of the Mayan ruins he explored.

With many Merritt readers this story is an all-time favourite. The tiny golden people, the nightmarish Kraken, the good and beautiful Evalie, Leif himself, (whom all believe to be a reincarnation of Dwayanu, once lord of this underground realm and lover of Lur the witch woman) are elements unified by the struggles of two women to gain the love of Leif. One, the dark Lur, believes him to be the reincarnation of Dwayanu, who once loved her and whom she loved in return. The other Evalie, is the epitome of everything fine, noble and good in women. In the magazine and book version, Lur, with her faithful white wolf, is killed trying to destroy Evalie. Then Leif takes Evalie back to the surface world.

Laying bare the human temptation and gnawing doubts that haunt all men, the author has Leif reflect :

"Ai, Lur—Witch-woman ! I see you lying there, smiling with lips grown tender—the white wolf's head upon your breast ! And Dwayanu still lives within me !

Abruptly, Merritt did another switch. With a theme borrowed from Fitz-James O'Brien's *The Wondersmith*, he produced a tale of witchcraft which he originally called *The Dolls of Mme. Mandilip*, but which *Argosy* changed to *Burn Witch Burn* ! The novel, which began in the October 22,

1932 number bears the stamp of a skilled professional as it moves at a breathless pace to unfold the story of a sinister old woman who sends her animated mannikins from a night-shadowed doll house with their poisoned needle-swords to slay her unsuspecting victims. Like *Seven Footprints to Satan*, the film producers quickly seized upon this one, casting Lionel Barrymore in the role of Mme. Mandilip in *The Devil Dolls*.

Creep, Shadow ! commencing in *Argosy* for September 8, 1934, marked the end of Merritt's most productive period. *Creep, Shadow* is a sequel to *Burn Witch Burn !* This time, Merritt dwelt in sombre imaginative fashion on the near-lost powers of witchcraft surviving from 10,000 years in the past, implying shadow life and shadow creatures. Where before he was impatient to plunge into his wonder-worlds, now he proceeds deliberately, examining the problem intellectually before increasing the tempo of the action. There are some brilliant scenes and fine artistic passages in the novel, but it reveals a Merritt more concerned with the method than the substance of his art. Though he lived another nine years, Merritt never completed another story, contenting himself with revising his old ones.

Pride in his art remained, but he ceased to dream.

Always gracious toward his admirers, Merritt gave generously of himself to the science fiction fan movement. When *Argosy* begged for something from his pen, he pleaded lack of time, but he presented as a gift to the editors of *Fantasy Magazine*, a short story, *The Drone*, to commemorate the second anniversary of that fine fan magazine in 1934.

Even in this tiny realm of amateur publication, Merritt was to establish his supremacy. Seventeen authors were asked by the editors of the same magazine to write a chapter each in a round-robin novel, *Cosmos*. Each writer was requested to continue from where another left off, but the chapters had to be complete in themselves. The authors were Ralph Milne Farley, David H. Keller, Arthur J. Burks, Bob Olsen, Francis Flagg, John W. Campbell Jr., Otis Adelbert Kline, E. Hoffman Price, Abner J. Gelula, Raymond A. Palmer, J. Harvey Haggard, Edward E. Smith, P. Schuyler Miller, L. A. Eshbach, Eando Binder, Edmond Hamilton, and A. Merritt himself. A vote of the readers established that Merritt's chapter, *The Last Poet and the Robots*, describing how a scientist-poet destroys a world of robots who have rebelled and conquered man was overwhelmingly the favourite.

Emile Schumacher, a well-known feature writer for *The American Weekly*, returned to New York on Thursday, August 29, 1943, after completing an unusual assignment given him by A. Merritt, who was now full editor. He had been sent to secure eye-witness material about a volcano that had blasted out of a Mexican cornfield to cover seventy-five square miles of surrounding countryside with ash.

"I knew the story would appeal to A. Merritt with his tremendous fondness for the occult" Schumacher said, quite possibly to justify his linking of the mysterious volcano's eruption with the dying curse of an Aztec Emperor which he fabricated from whole cloth. He found Merritt cheerful, but looking tired and haggard and about to fly down to Florida for a rest.

"Have the library dig up a really spectacular photograph of the volcano belching smoke and fire," was the last order that Merritt gave him. "Then I'll have Lee do a portrait drawing of Montezuma the Second, who mistook the invading Cortes for the fair god Quezacoatl of the Axtec legend—a mistake that subsequently proved fatal," he added contemplatively.

The next morning Merritt was dead of a heart attack suffered at the age of fifty-nine while at Indian Rock Beach, Florida.

His work lives on. Popular Publications, Inc. brought out a new periodical—*A. Merritt's Magazine*—so entitled because of his continuing popularity with readers everywhere. It appeared in December 1949 and ran five bi-monthly issues. No other fantasy author has been so honoured.

Avon Publications, publishers of pocket editions, reprinted all of his fiction. Edition has followed edition for the last seventeen years. The seven novels and one short story collection have sold upwards of four million copies, Avon estimates, and the end is not yet. *Seven Footprints to Satan* has sold one million copies alone, and *Burn Witch Burn* 1, 500,000.

Liveright reports that five Merritt novels are still in print and selling steadily in hard covers, despite the pocket book editions. The five novels are *The Moon Pool*, *Dwellers in the Mirage*, *The Face in the Abyss*, *Seven Footprints to Satan* and *Burn Witch Burn* !

Abraham Merritt could not have wished for a more appropriate monument.

—Sam Moskowitz

There are some odd but extremely plausible people in this story. Accident-prones, for instance; custom-getters; custom-takers-away; pyro-kineticists; even an ice-creamphobe. Working together as a team they run a very fine business.

TOO BAD!

BY E. C. TUBB

The man was tall, thin, with a lugubrious expression. He wore a dun-coloured blouse, frayed slacks and his sandals needed an overhaul. He walked into the empty shop to make a purchase and, before he came out, a dozen others had followed him.

I looked through the window and felt a stir of anticipation. It could have been sheer coincidence but then again it could have been something else. I followed him to another store, stood listening as he spoke to the dour-faced man behind the counter.

"Excuse me, do you stock Firlgibbetts Flushtabs?"

"No, try Donagon's down the street."

"Thank you."

He turned. I turned with him. Behind us four men waited to be served, money all ready in their hands. Two women entered as I watched and another couple caught the door as it swung shut.

And the fellow hadn't even spent money!

I tapped him on the shoulder as we reached the street.

"Pardon me, friend, how often does that happen?"

"Does what happen?" He was cautious. I couldn't blame him, there are too many sharp operators in the cities nowadays.

"That." I jerked my head at the store. "How often do you go into an empty store and leave it full of customers?"

He thought about it for a while. I'd expected that reaction too, it takes time for some people to realise just what they are.

"Fairly often," he admitted. He thought a while longer. "In fact it happens all the time."

"I thought so." I handed him my business card. He read it, his lips moving. "Sam Berenstein ; Business Actuary." He looked at me. "I don't get it."

"You will, friend. You will." I handed him a ten credit bill. "You've got my card and my address. Report for work at nine sharp tomorrow morning. Okay?"

I'd guessed right, the chap was on his uppers. He thanked me with tears in his eyes.

Mark was in the office when I got back. He was studying a sheaf of reports and he didn't look happy. He brightened a little when I told him the good news.

"A custom-getter? Are you sure?"

"Have I even been wrong?" I checked my notebook. "Name of Daniels, Jack Daniels. He looks as if he's lost his last penny but man, can he bring them in!"

I sat down and dragged out a map of the city. Finding talent wasn't enough, the skill came in being able to use it. Daniels, though he didn't know it, was pouring money into the lap of every storekeeper he visited. The trick was in being able to deflect some of that cash to a worthy cause. That cause being the business I'd invented, built and operated.

"Now let me see." I examined the map. "He should be able to tackle say, a hundred stores a day. We can work him in with Miss Andrews and Joe Shaker, that way he won't get too familiar."

I concentrated on the map. Custom-getters, like their opposites, worked best in small, privately owned stores. The big supermarkets had too large a turn-over for them to affect it all that much and, as those places were always run by managers, they didn't have the keen, personal interest the little store owners had.

Finally I had a section mapped out and a list of addresses drawn up. The next thing was to visit each of them and

come to some arrangement with the owners. Mark called to me as I reached the door.

"While you're that way better call in on Samson. According to him he's in the red."

"Welching?"

"I'd say yes. I ran a check and, on the basis of an average sale of two eighty-five, he owes us money."

"Okay, Mark." I didn't argue with him, if he said Samson was holding out then Samson was doing just that. "I'll see him."

The routine was, by this time, familiar. I'd visit a selected store, ask to see the owner and went directly to the point.

"I've been checking your store. Business is so-so, I can make it better. Interested?"

They were interested.

"This is what we do. I take a twenty-percent cut of all increased turnover. My auditor will check the books and you pay him at the end of each week. Agree and we're in business."

Usually they agreed. Mostly they were happy with the arrangement. Samson was different.

He ran a crummy hardware store selling ice-cream on the side and he'd been shaking hands with bankruptcy when I'd signed him up. I'd worked on his behalf too, putting my best operators on the job and, naturally, trade had boomed. Now he was getting greedy.

"Things are bad, Sam," he said, shaking his head. "I'd sell the joint if I could find a buyer."

"How much are you asking?" Then, as he hesitated; "Never mind. My auditor tells me that your holding out. How about it, Samson?"

"He's lying, Sam. Business has never been so bad."

"You want to end the arrangement?"

"Guess I'll have to." His relief was obvious. Just who he thought I was or how I operated I couldn't guess, but he'd obviously expected some sort of trouble. He was going to get it too.

I waved the cancelled contract, folded it, put it in my pocket. A shadow darkened the door and I made it just in time. Miss Andrews blinked at me from beneath her old fashioned bonnet.

"Why, Mr. Bernstein, I didn't expect to see you in these parts. Checking up?"

"Not on you, Miss Andrews." I took her by the arm, a fragile old lady who even now didn't guess her real power. "Samson is off the books," I told her. "Just finish off your round for today and report at the office in the morning. I'll have a new schedule for you."

She smiled at me and wandered off. I found a phone booth and dialed the office. Mark glowered at me from the screen.

"Lower the boom on Samson," I ordered. "Who have we available?"

"Lou Pregar, Gaffer Hardigan, Mary Wright—"

"That's the ice-creamphobe, isn't she?"

"That's right, Sam. You want her now?"

"Tomorrow." I remembered Mary Wright, a sweet young thing whose metabolism simply couldn't tolerate ice-cream. I could imagine Samson's feeling when she bought a cone, licked it, and fell on the floor in a mass of hives, convulsions and threatened law-suits. "Just get Lou and Gaffer on the job for now. If they hurry they'll be able to kill the evening trade."

Odd types Lou and Gaffer. Nothing wrong about them at all but they could go into a store, mumble around and, for no reason, everyone else in the shop would suddenly lose their patience and go elsewhere.

In fact all my operators were odd types. Nothing physical, of course, it was just that odd things happened when they were around. Like customers suddenly deciding to come into a hitherto empty shop. Or customers suddenly deciding that they simply couldn't wait to be served. Things like that.

The hard part, of course, was in finding them. Putting them to work was the next obvious thing.

Jack Daniels turned up sharp next morning as I knew he would. He still looked the same, down-at-heel and slightly frayed. He'd been thinking or someone had been doing it for him because he was full of questions. I brushed them aside.

"Just follow the list," I explained. "Check on all the stores and, if they're empty, go inside."

"What'll I buy?"

"Nothing." I was definite about that. "Not today, anyway. Later, when you learn the ropes, you can make a small purchase, something which you can take back and change later on. No need to run up high expenses. Today you just wander around and ask for something they haven't got in stock."

Take your time about it. Don't come out until the place is full of customers."

"But—"

"You're wasting time." I nodded to Miss Andrews. "The lady will put you straight. Keep an eye on him will you, Miss Andrews."

She smiled and said she would and led the new boy out to work. A sweet woman, I often wondered how she'd managed before I found her.

The morning was exceptionally busy. It wasn't often I had to reorganise the schedules but finding the new boy had made it essential, and it had thrown me out. Not that I minded, Daniels could cover at least a hundred stores and my share of the increased turnover would more than compensate for the extra work. Much more. But adjusting the trade of little stores wasn't the only thing I had to do.

There was a pyrokinetic I wanted to chase down. He, like all of them, didn't exactly like fires but they seemed to spring up all about them. My prospect had two tenements and a garage to his credit already not counting minor conflagrations none of them, of course, directly his responsibility.

I had one pyro on the staff already but he was busy helping to ruin a firework factory, a neat little arrangement I had come to with one of their competitors, but I could always use more. You'd be surprised at the number of seemingly prosperous businesses who would welcome a genuine fire as a handout from Heaven.

And there was Andy Quentish.

Andy was an accident prone. They're common enough, far more than most people think, but he was an exceptional specimen of his type. Set Andy down and you could take bets on just how long it would be before something happened. When I wasn't using him I kept him well away from the office. The trouble was that he wouldn't stay away.

Andy like to eat.

"We'll have to fix up Andy," I said to Mark. "If we don't he'll be bothering us again and you know what happened the last time."

He lifted his face from his books and nodded, looking as glum as the memory made me feel. That was the time we'd had a man from the Better Business Bureau call, asking personal questions about what sort of a protection racket I was

do you believe in parallel universes?

We do. We believe, for instance, that the worlds of jazz and sf are parallel, a little more than merely co-existent . . . they have a lot in common. Such as intellectual kicks and excitement; offbeatness, for people who somehow can't go all the way with the world they live in. Snobs, of course, parade on the fringes, but the true loonies, world-wise, are to be found at the dead centre, as often as not gyrating from one parallel world to the other with the greatest of ease. Naturally, you are an sf-addict, or you wouldn't be reading this. Why not explore the further joys we can offer, that is, unless you have already done so?

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running. I'd staved him off and he'd fallen down the stairs on the way out but things could just have easily gone the other way.

Andy was an asset—like nitro-glycerine to a miner, but with accident prones you don't take chances.

"How about the Pottery Shoppe? Couldn't we plant him there?"

I had a personal reason not to like the Pottery Shoppe. It was one of these hand-made-crafts places, run by a woman who had done more than refuse my offer of increased business. I still didn't like to think of what she had called me. As yet I hadn't lowered the boom on her, after all, there is such a thing as business ethics, but it was no time to be squeamish.

Mark looked up, his face thoughtful.

"We could try and sell them insurance," he suggested. "They'll refuse, naturally, then we send in Andy." His eye kindled at the thought of it. "He'll be a customer so they can't throw him out. With the charge he's built up recently I'll give him an hour before the place falls apart."

He was exaggerating, of course, nothing so drastic would happen. But maybe a shelf would collapse, or a few screws pull loose for no reason at all, or a crate of china fall on someone's head. None of which, naturally, would be good for business.

Then, of course, they'd think about buying insurance.

And, of more immediate importance, it would keep Andy off our necks.

That decided I felt I could relax. The custom-getters and custom-takers-away were busy on their rounds. The latter to kill trade and the former to build it up again after the owners had signed a contract. Samson would be taken care of by the ice-creamphobe and the pyrokinetic was busy. Andy was taken care of and that left only the Tele Twins.

Len had a permanent job, he was the telepath of the pair and made the kind of auditor every business man dreamed of. Mark checked his figures, of course, but Len could pin down a client from his own conscience. He was not very bright in other ways, he had never learned to read let alone write, but I considered him one of my greatest finds. His brother, Ed, was something else.

Ed was a teleport and to get Len I had to take them both. Ed wasn't a very good teleport, he could move things, little

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things, only a very short distance. How can you use a man like that? Honestly, I mean?

Still, you can't have everything.

I was still consoling myself when the Government man arrived. I could tell he was a Government man straight away. They have a way about them, a smug superiority, a triple-plated self-confidence which comes from knowing they hold all the aces. You can't beat a Government man.

This one fooled me, he wasn't from the Department of Internal Revenue.

"Sam Berenstein?" He flashed me his identification.

"Marlow, C.I.D. We've been looking for you, Sam."

"What for?"

"Can't you guess?" He was a big man, with an easy smile and an easy way of sitting. "Sweet racket you've been running, Sam. Want to tell me about it?"

"I've got nothing to tell." My self-confidence came out from hiding and lifted its head. "I'm a business actuary, nothing more, nothing less. I've never committed a crime in my entire life."

Marlow surprised me. "Did I say you had?"

"Well, no, but—"

"We're on to you, Sam," he said gently. "Nothing we can book you for, I'll admit that, but it's got to stop."

"Why?" I stared him straight in the eye. "If I'm not breaking any laws how can you stop me? Anyway, what harm am I doing?"

"You'd be surprised," he said dryly. "Up to date we've had two hundred and fifteen complaints that you're running a protection racket."

"That's ridiculous!"

"I'll admit it, but what else did you expect those store owners to think? They signed up with you, you collected and, when they wanted to back down, they began to lose trade. They didn't like that, Sam, so they complained. The police couldn't find anything wrong so they appealed to us."

"Too bad." I helped myself to a cigar. "What are you going to do about it?"

"We'll find a way." Marlow leaned back in his chair. "You know, Sam, you're a peculiar character. You've got a talent and you've made it pay. Are you patriotic?"

"Uh?"

"I asked if you were patriotic."

"Sure I am. What's that got to do with it?"

"You'll find out. Want to know how we cottoned on to you?"

I waved the cigar. I was beginning to feel better, lots better. If Marlow had been going to arrest me he would have done it long ago. And I wasn't worried about the complaints or suspicion. With my team of operators I could travel the country, set up in business anywhere I chose. But two hundred and fifteen! I hadn't guessed that there had been so many.

"Okay, Jack!" Marlow called. "You can come in now."

Jack Daniels, looking as frayed and as lugubrious as when I'd first met him, entered the office. He had the grace to look ashamed of himself.

"A plant," I said bitterly. "A lousy phoney."

"Think again." Marlow shook his head. "You aren't the only one with an eye to spot the unusual, Sam, Jack's genuine enough. We just wanted to prove what we already suspected. You aren't unusual either, Sam. You're good, but not unusual. That's why we can use you."

"How?"

"Well, you know how it is, Sam. All these new installations, the atomic plants, the rocket sites, all that sort of thing. An accident can cost a lot of money, slow down production, maybe lose us the war when and if it comes. Security can screen out the conscious saboteurs but the rest—" He shrugged. "It takes a man like you, Sam, to spot the accident prones, the teleguys, the pyrokinetics, all the rest of them. That's why you've been inducted."

"I've what!"

"You're in the army," he said patiently. "You've got a commission." He smiled at my expression. "Too bad."

On the way out I fell down the stairs and almost broke my neck. I spotted the big figure looming against the light.

"Andy!" I yelled. "Get out of here!"

But it was too late.

—E. C. Tubb



BOOK REVIEWS

Since Hiroshima, the insidious progress of nuclear armament hand in hand with global tensions has, to an alarming degree, failed to undermine public and (apparently) governmental complacency. "Ban the Bomb" demonstrations are titbits for the popular press, and world disarmament is deadlocked over stockpiles of hideous death. At this stage of man's development it seems incredible that thinking men can envisage the destruction of all life on this planet, and can be indifferent, indecisive, impotent or villainous enough to be able to do anything about it. Time may have diminished the torment of the surviving Hiroshimites, and only sensitive atomic scientists may still have the occasional nightmare based on their inexorable data, but the layman has only the infrequent speculation of fiction writers to give him some idea of an atomic Armageddon. For this reason I would like to see Mordecai Roshwald's *Level 7* (Heinemann, 15/-) required reading for every literate human on this earth, for there has never been before such a comment on the utter imbecility of nuclear warfare.

It is a first-person narrative in diary form kept by a nameless "push-button" officer of an unidentified military power, seconded to a subterranean offensive command post and trained for the sole purpose of pressing the buttons that will send the retaliatory war-heads flashing to the "enemy." A "technical error" sparks off the last and shortest war . . . A coldly brilliant piece of writing in stark contrast to Pat Frank's recent *Alas Babylon* of which I now recall the closing lines where the Colonel confides "We won the war, we really clobbered 'em . . . Not that it matters." And the hero turned away to face the thousand year night. On *Level 7* the last man faces a mere few months to the bitter futile end.

—Leslie Flood

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